

Section III: Research Projects and Dissertations – Work in Progress.

Michel Christian, Université de Genève (Switzerland): Party and Society in the German Democratic Republic and in Socialist Czechoslovakia. PhD Project.¹

The aim of my research is to write a comparative social history of the ruling communist parties in the GDR and in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1989. Up to now the two parties have been mainly analyzed as power-exerting institutions that were meant to impose decisions and conducts from the top. Social history, which is alive and well in Germany and to a lesser extent in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, focuses more on the interactive processes and attempts to analyze the practice of domination in its historical context to pinpoint the actors' specific *modus operandi*. Such a perspective still has to be applied to communist parties. One has the feeling that "society" was studied first while the communist party was set on the side, as if it wasn't part of society.

The parties' coming to power and their settling down as ruling institutions have been well documented. Their structures were described as centralized organizations that were represented at every level and in every social field. This is why the party was said to be "similar to the second skin of the social fabric". My dissertation attempts to answer questions in the opposite direction. Instead of asking how the communist parties came to power, I explore how they maintained their hold on society in the long run, since the practice of government was never and could never be reduced to mere coercion. Rather than considering the party as an institution outside of society, I envision it as a part of society. Communist parties were organizations embodied in societies they contributed to shape, and those societies in turn shaped the parties.

As a first step I research who the communist party members were in the GDR and in Czechoslovakia and how membership evolved. Members were less likely to be blue-collar workers over time while the proportion of white collar workers increased within the party. Gender and age should also be taken into account. Figuring who the members were is indicative of the party's place in society. Parallel to that, the power relations inside the parties need to be described. More than simple mechanical relations, they are social practices that require a very local focus, inside regional, local and grassroots party organizations in firms, in the state institutions as well as in schools and universities. Nowhere but at that level can the practice of power and authority be adequately observed. Such practices are to be found in diverse social fields, like firms, schools, or the police for instance. They involve individuals that are not abstract party members but rather people with specific social capital, that cannot be reduced to simple political capital. The relation between cultural and political capital is therefore a crucial one.

The comparative dimension of my research brings together a broader panel of situations. It is an opportunity to assess the relative role of national contexts and specific national histories in the place that communist parties take in both societies. I chose to compare the GDR and

¹ Under the direction of Prof. Sandrine Kott.

Czechoslovakia because of their similarities. Both are industrial societies that developed early social-democratic parties and experienced parliamentary democracy before 1945. Their history was nevertheless quite different insofar as the two communist parties came to power and remained in command in different ways. A comparative perspective broadens the scope of inquiry. It opens the way to questions on the experience of power for a communist party, and on the consequences this has on society as well as on the party as part of society.