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Report on Lydie Kárníková's dissertation thesis "Discourse(s) on Communism in Post-Socialist Czech Republic: Memory, Heritage and Media"

This dissertation tackles an important dimension of post-socialist media and culture, namely the construction of collective memory of the socialist past, with a particular focus on the role of (mainstream) media in this process. The empirical part of the thesis focuses on two interesting and relevant cases, one involving the media coverage of the establishment of the Czech national memory institute between 2005 and 2007, and the second comprising media coverage of controversies surrounding the renaming of streets in the city of Ostrava between 1999 and 2019. The thesis is clearly structured and fluently written, grounded in a relevant range of literature, demonstrates a good grasp of relevant conceptual distinctions and theoretical debates in the field, and is based on a competently executed piece of original research using appropriate methods. That said, there are certain aspects of each of the key elements of the thesis that would benefit from further elaboration and consideration. In what follows I review each element of the thesis in turn, commenting on strengths and noting areas that could be improved further or would benefit from further clarification.

The opening chapters offer a clear introduction to the problem and the relevant context of the thesis, in a manner that makes the rather complex local context of Czech memory politics clearly understandable to an outsider, which should be commended. The literature review covers a wide range of relevant bodies of work and demonstrates an in-depth as well as sufficiently sophisticated understanding of key conceptual distinctions and arguments in memory studies, (critical) discourse studies and cultural studies. I was particularly impressed by the deft interlinking of relevant concepts and arguments from three rather disparate fields, which does a good job at not just synthesizing but also integrating different conceptual threads into a coherent whole.

That said, there are some areas of literature that I missed, or felt could be developed further. The first one concerns the choice of key concepts and arguments from memory studies. While the discussion adequately covers issues of collective, individual and social memory, as well as the distinction between cultural and communicative memory, I was surprised to find no mention of literature on vernacular, official, and public memory (specifically, Bodnar's 1992 study). Given the focus on cultural memory, I felt the distinctions between vernacular, official, and public memory could have offered a compelling way of conceptualizing the relationships between different discourses on communism found in the two cases, and the specific hierarchies of political power at work at relevant points in time.

Another area of literature review that I felt could have been developed further was the discussion of existing literature on post-socialist memory and media. A structured review of this body of work would have enabled the author to provide a clearer identification of gaps in knowledge the thesis is seeking to fill, as well offer a more elaborated and ambitious positioning of key findings, with a better sense of original insights afforded by the thesis, and contributions to wider debates on memory and post-socialist media. Finally, the conceptualization of the role of media in processes of remembering could have been pushed further. While this issue is addressed using relevant literature from memory studies, 'the media' are conceptualized in rather broad terms, as if they constitute a homogeneous block, providing little sense of how different types of media (e.g. tabloid vs. broadsheets, online vs broadcast/print etc.) or different structural features of the media system (e.g. different levels of state control, different levels of polarization and political parallelism) may affect the way specific media outlets contribute to the process of remembering. As I point out further on, this is reflected in the analysis, which – while pointing to evidence of (relative) diversity in representations of the socialist past, especially in the second case – struggles to make sense of the role of media in enabling this (relative) diversity.

The chosen methodology, research design and empirical focus are all very well explained, although I could not help but wonder why the author decided to make the conceptual and methodological choices she did. First, I was puzzled by the decision to focus on cultural rather than communicative memory (or a combination of both), especially given the relative lack of work on communicative memory not just in literature on post-socialist media and memory, but in the field of memory and media more generally. Second, I was similarly surprised at the decision to leave out social media. And lastly, I was also intrigued by the decision to limit the investigation of media coverage of the memory institute to 2005-2007 rather than examining more recent controversies surrounding the institution. While I certainly appreciate the continued importance of mainstream media, and can see value in a more long-term perspective, I felt the addition of social media and/or inclusion of more recent controversies could have significantly strengthened the potential for original contributions.

Moving on to analysis, there is a lot to be commended. The data has clearly been both collected and analysed in an exemplary manner, following very clear and systematic procedures. This is not often the case in studies purporting to use discourse analysis methods, which typically suffer from an underdeveloped approach to sampling or unclear analytical procedures. Nonetheless, there are areas of analysis that could have been pushed further. In particular, I missed a consideration of differences (if any) between online and offline outlets, and also felt that the second case study could have said more about the relative role of media; while the different types of discourses are clearly laid out, there is little sense on how they are distributed across different types of media covered in the case study; or how the particular characteristics of the media that featured much of the coverage (e.g. regional/local outlets) may have contributed to such coverage. Furthermore, I would have also wanted to get a clearer sense of changes over time (if any) in the second case study. Finally, one small misgiving I have with regards to data presentation

concerns the format of referencing for empirical examples, which uses a letter and number system based on lists of news articles included in the Appendix. A more standard format, with the date and title of the media outlet in the main body of the text, would have enabled the reader to explore connections between discourses and (types of) media outlets much more easily.

The discussion chapter is, again, well-structured and compelling, but reflects some of the weaknesses of the conceptual framework and the literature review highlighted earlier. First, I would have wanted to see a more elaborated consideration of the role of the media in not just amplifying the dominant discourse, but also enabling the voicing of alternative perspectives (especially in the second case, but also, to some extent, in the first one). Although the analysis of the two cases mentions some contextual factors that help explain the appearance of alternative discourses on communism in both cases, this discussion does have much to say about the media. For instance, which features of the Czech media landscape in the 2000s enabled the formulation and persistence of discourses on communism found in the centre-left daily *Právo* and the KSČM party outlet *Haló noviny*? The political affiliations of the two outlets are mentioned, but there is little clarity on how these affiliations relate to professional journalistic practices, or the wider trends in Czech journalism and media culture mentioned in the literature review. Or, to mention another example: what was the role of local or regional media in contributing to a more diverse discursive landscape in the second case, and is there any evidence (perhaps from secondary sources) of social media offering an alternative, (semi)public forum for the articulation and articulation of discursive elements that coalesced in media coverage of street renaming and countered the dominant framing of the socialist past?

In summary, this is a strong, well-rounded thesis, and I look forward to discussing it with the candidate at the upcoming examination.

Yours sincerely

