

MERVART, Jan – RŮŽIČKA, Jiří. *REHABILITATE MARX! THE CZECHOSLOVAK PARTY INTELLIGENTSIA AND POST-STALINIST MODERNITY*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2025. 379 pages.
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Jan Mervart and Jiří Růžička's *Rehabilitate Marx!* makes a significant contribution to the study of the intellectual history of state socialism in Central Europe. The monograph is based on the Czech edition published in 2020. It provides a nuanced analysis of Czechoslovak Marxist thought during the post-Stalinist period, from Stalin's death in 1953 to the Prague Spring of 1968. Rather than viewing this era as merely a transitional phase between Stalinism and the "actually existing socialism" of the 1970s and 1980s (p. 3), the authors regard post-Stalinism as a unique intellectual epoch. According to the authors, the "*book demonstrates that post-Stalinist intellectuals were not concerned with rejecting the socialist modernizing product, but with a critical reevaluation of its Stalinist type, and they sought new points of departure for a new post-Stalinist modernity*" (p. 5).

The book's main argument is both bold and convincing: post-Stalinism should be understood not merely as a thaw or de-Stalinization, but as a unique form of organized modernity with its own internal dynamics. Book strives to contribute to a field best described as the history of thought (p. 39). The authors explore the three key currents that influenced the intellectual growth of post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia: Marxist humanism, techno-optimism, and dialectical determinism.

The authors provide a strong theoretical base. Drawing on social theorists such as Peter Wagner, Alain Touraine, and Jóhann P. Árnason, Mervart and Růžička build a conceptual framework that allows for a nuanced analysis of post-Stalinist thought. The idea of "internal plurality" is especially helpful, illustrating how multiple interpretations of Marxism coexisted within the Communist Party intelligentsia without undermining the core legitimacy of the socialist project. Mervart's and Růžička's view of post-Stalinism is based solely on analyzing the opinions of party intellectuals, whose influence in shaping post-Stalinist thought was decisive (p. 29). Unlike Stalinism, in which party leadership tightly controlled access to truth, post-Stalinist scientists, philosophers, economists, and artists within the party increasingly claimed the right to interpret Marx's teachings and critically address current issues while remaining loyal to the system. The authors state: "*Post-Stalinism is best distinguished from the revolutionary era of Stalinism by changes in thinking, or sometimes in minor changes in the social structure, rather than in sweeping personnel changes*" (p. 22). This insight helps explain why post-Stalinist reflexivity could develop within institutions originally designed to support orthodoxy.

The book's greatest strength lies in its combination of theoretical depth and empirical detail. Mervart and Růžička have carried out comprehensive archival research, examining philosophical journals, economic debates, party documents, and writings from that era. They successfully situate textual analysis within institutional contexts, showing how organizations such as the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, artistic unions, and others formed during Stalinism inadvertently created opportunities for critical reflection.

The text is organized into six main chapters, each exploring a different aspect of post-Stalinist thought. It covers the post-Stalinist questioning of real structure (chapter 2), the definition of subjectivity (chapter 3), the paired concepts of folkness and the nation (chapter 4), revolutionary change (chapter 5), and the limitations and “blank spots” of post-Stalinist thinking (chapter 6).

The introductory chapter defines post-Stalinism and its key characteristics, including reflexivity, internal diversity, and historicity. It then analyzes the “real structure,” or how the post-Stalinist intelligentsia viewed the core makeup of socialist society. The authors focus on key Marxist philosophical concepts: lawfulness, productive forces, practice, and dialectics. They illustrate a gradual shift from a deterministic outlook on history to an emphasis on creative practice, and from economic reductionism to an acknowledgment of the complexity of social processes.

Further chapters explore specific debates about the nature of socialist society. The authors analyze discussions on the scientific and technological revolution, especially Radovan Richta’s project *Civilization at a Crossroads*, the role of the market in the socialist economy, the relationship between the base and the superstructure, humanism, and alienation. They carefully trace the development of individual positions, showing how an intellectual environment arose in the 1960s that set the stage for the 1968 reform movement.

Of particular interest is their analysis of how Czechoslovak Marxists came to terms with the legacy of Stalinism. The authors demonstrate that the criticism of the “cult of personality” was not just a condemnation of Stalin’s excesses. It led to a reevaluation of fundamental Marxist principles. They argue that dogmatism was not seen as a deviation from true Marxism but rather as an inherent risk that could only be avoided through ongoing theoretical reflection. The reviewer finds the sixth and final chapter especially interesting, perhaps because the authors set aside their neutrality in analyzing post-Stalinist thought (p. 226). In this chapter, they explore the limits of post-Stalinism, such as the absence of a clear political concept, a shift toward nationalism, beliefs in civilizational superiority, and silence on issues related to social and gender inequality.

There are only a few critical points to note. While the authors place Czechoslovakia within larger contexts, systematic comparative analysis remains limited. Occasional references to Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union suggest useful comparisons, but the book mainly concentrates on Czechoslovak developments in isolation. A more consistent engagement with similar debates elsewhere would strengthen the argument.

The relationship between elite intellectual discourse and broader social dynamics receives insufficient attention. This is the critique that the authors anticipate and explain. Focusing on party intelligentsia is a valid methodological choice. However, a reader might gain a clear understanding of internal Party debate but only a superficial sense of how ideas circulated beyond academic and editorial circles. Therefore, it would still be interesting to see how the sophisticated theoretical debates related to lived experiences under state socialism.

Finally, although the term “internal plurality” effectively describes the coexistence of multiple Marxist interpretations, the issue of whether intellectual debate can remain independent from political power remains insufficiently explored. There were several

instances in the 1960s that demonstrated the limits of loyal-party opposition. The authors acknowledge a constant tension between the party leadership and the critical party intelligentsia, but they do not systematically examine how power relations influenced which ideas could circulate and which stayed marginalized.

Despite these criticisms, *Rehabilitate Marx!* remains a significant academic achievement. The book challenges two traditional interpretations of the period. One depicts the communist intelligentsia solely as mouthpieces of the Communist Party, while the other views the period only as a prelude to the Prague Spring. The authors position the Czechoslovak party intelligentsia as a self-reflective, internally diverse, and intellectually serious environment that fostered multiple competing visions of the future of socialism.

The book successfully establishes post-Stalinist Czechoslovak Marxist thought as a valid subject of historical study. It also raises broader questions about the possibilities and limits of critical thought under restrictive conditions. Mervart and Růžička introduce a fascinating, pluralistic world of competing socialist visions. Their theoretical framework will be valuable to scholars exploring not only Czechoslovakia but also other contexts where intellectuals attempt to reform authoritarian systems from within.

Rehabilitate Marx! succeeds in its goal of serious engagement with post-Stalinist thought on its own terms while keeping a critical distance. Jan Mervart and Jiří Růžička thus make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of post-Stalinist intellectual history. Despite minor critical reservations, it is an outstanding work that deepens our understanding of (not only) Czechoslovak state socialism.

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