6. Eco-social enterprises: ethical business in a post-socialist context

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we look at the varied strands of alternative capitalist and non-capitalist enterprise in one of the 'post-socialist' (or 'post-Communist') countries in Europe,[1] the Czech Republic. Before we start, let it be said that the 'post-socialist' label subsuming these countries under one umbrella is simplified: they had diverse cultural and socio-economic histories prior to their membership in the Eastern Bloc between the 1940s and the end of the 1980s. Furthermore, the regimes themselves differed in degree and form of dominance, and in degree of resistance from below. In the former Czechoslovakia, for example, soon after accession to power in 1948, the regime abolished some cooperatives, deprived the rest of their democratic governance and, perhaps most traumatically, forcibly herded one-and-a-half million small farmers (in a country of 14 million) into eleven thousand new, top-down, and undemocratic 'unified' agricultural cooperatives, which swallowed up their land and animals (Kubačák 1995, pp. 45, 181). Such approaches failed in countries like Poland, where small family farms resisted enforced 'collectivization' under Communism.

However, European post-socialist countries do appear to have *some* things in common even today. One might be a majority perspective that does not recognize valuable non-capitalist traditions and institutions whose roots lie *deeper* than the Communist period, since these traditions and institutions were often appropriated or buried in oblivion by the Communist regime (Hausner 2009; Kiss and Mihály 2018). In Czechoslovakia before the Second World War, for example, there were more than sixteen thousand credit, agricultural, housing, energy, consumer, and producer cooperatives. They mitigated social inequalities, supported small farmers, and cultivated solidarity and democratic practice (Feierabend 1952; Johanisova 2005, pp. 27–32). After 1948, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia terminated not only such authentic cooperatives,[2] but also private enterprise and profit appropriation. Only state-owned enterprises or inauthentic cooperatives, such as the 'unified' agricultural cooperatives mentioned above, were allowed to engage in production and trade. Non-profit organizations were tightly controlled and had to toe the Communist party line. Tendencies in other Eastern Bloc countries were similar.

Unsurprisingly, this has discredited bottom-up left-wing discourses, conflating 'communal' and 'voluntary' in many people's minds with 'Communist' and 'state-ordained'. The democratic revolutions at the close of the 1980s also led to a sea change in government policies in these countries, with private enterprise and profit becoming glorified. In the Czech Republic, most state-owned enterprises were privatized, as were many assets whose ownership had been newly shifted from state to local municipalities, including housing. Further, like other post-Communist countries, the Czech Republic was labelled a 'transition economy', 'transition' here meaning a transition to capitalism and, implicitly, a 'catching up' with the West.

As researchers taking a critical view of the current economic system, we are interested in another kind of 'transition': a transition beyond capitalism to economies free of built-in growth mechanisms, which would help both human and more-than-human communities to flourish in a long-term perspective (d'Alisa et al. 2015; Gibson et al. 2015; Lang et al. 2018). This chapter looks at some of the seeds of such economies in the Czech Republic today.

ECO-SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

To bring to light other-than-capitalist enterprises in the Czech Republic, we undertook a qualitative research project (2014–16) aimed at revealing their diversity and learning more about their structure, functioning, background and values.[3] The entities we were interested in were formal or informal group initiatives that regularly engaged in production, service provision, trade and exchange, in a market setting or otherwise. We also included those that were involved in care for the diversity of non-human life. Based on our previous work (Johanisova and Fraňková 2013, 2017), we chose the term 'eco-social enterprise' to describe them.

Why 'eco-social enterprise'? Our work has been inspired by the discourse of 'social enterprise', which is influential in the EU policy sphere. As a response to pressures from below to legitimize a large swathe of enterprises that do not conform to the mainstream, the EU-supported concept of social enterprise denotes entities that espouse (i) an explicit general interest objective, (ii) limits on profit distribution to owners/members, and (iii) democratic/participatory governance of the enterprise (Borzaga and Defourny 2001; European Commission 2015). A typical social enterprise in this understanding would be a non-profit organization with a trading arm, or a cooperative providing social services in a local community.

In some ways, we found this social enterprise framework useful and inspiring. Criteria (i) and (ii) grow out of the historical tradition of the European cooperative, mutual and non-profit sectors (Evers and Laville 2004). At the same time, they align with the community economy concern with connectedness and the distribution of surplus back to communities that made them possible, not to owners/members only. Similarly, criterion (iii) has close ties to the idea of the *commons*, where the use and care of an asset is negotiated by a community (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013, chapters 3, 5).

Yet this social enterprise discourse still grows from an essentially mainstream economic ontology. To qualify as a social enterprise under the EU definition, an economic entity needs to have an official legal structure. And it is assumed to operate in a capitalist market, with an emphasis on innovation, economic risk, paid employment and permanent expansion. Such a discourse, which has found its way to countries like the Czech Republic via EU funding packages and exerted a good deal of influence (Fraňková et al. 2018), is necessarily performative, obscuring the existence of 'other' enterprises or pushing them into more mainstream positions. What is more, the discourse essentially represents social enterprises as patching up cracks in a 'business as usual', growth-oriented world via social inclusion, e.g. by providing employment or social services for disadvantaged groups (Borzaga et al. 2008; European Commission 2015; Hausner 2009, p. 227).

We use the concept of 'eco-social enterprise' both to acknowledge our debt to the social enterprise discourse and to emphasize our more radical and inclusive approach. In addition, our concept indicates that the environmental dimensions of economic alternatives are as important as the social (Gibson et al. 2015, p. 15). More subtly, it is meant to convey the

idea that the very structural and ideological characteristics of many economic alternatives give them an (often unacknowledged) environmental dimension. For example, cooperative members' shares do not as a rule grow in value along with the assets of the cooperative. This can make growth for growth's sake less attractive to cooperative members. Assuming that a systemic pressure towards economic growth is at odds with the flourishing of life, cooperatives can thus have a built-in eco-dimension, regardless of any explicit green goals (d'Alisa et al. 2015; Johanisova and Fraňková 2013, pp. 119–24; Johanisova and Wolf 2012, p. 565).[4]

The following are the five (sliding-scale) criteria of an eco-social enterprise used in our research. While the first three are adapted from the EU definition, the last two make space for the local, the informal, and the non-market (see also Fraňková et al. 2018; Johanisova and Fraňková 2017):

1. *Other-than-profit goals:* The founding documents of many eco-social enterprises contain explicit social, environmental or cultural aims: they exist to benefit a specific human or more-than-human community, or nature and society more generally. For authentic cooperatives, the case can be made that the basic goal of serving their members rather than maximising profit (ICA 2018) enables them to step out of the market logic when it contradicts members' wider interests. For example, they may continue to provide a service to their members, even though it may not be as profitable as other options (Johanisova et al. 2014).
2. *Using profits to replenish nature and community:* This criterion, differently worded (e.g. 'limits on distribution of profits to members/owners'), is the object of much discussion in social economy literature. Confusingly, 'non-profit' entities, whose rules forbid them from distributing *any* part of their profits, are often distinguished from 'not-for-profit' entities, where at least part of the profit can be distributed to members/owners (Evers and Laville 2004, pp. 11–13). Our wording is inspired by Gibson-Graham et al. (2013, chapter 3), who make a case for distribution of profits (or surplus, which need not only be financial) back to communities and ecosystems that made profit creation possible.
3. *Democratic and localized ownership and governance patterns:* Democratic or participatory governance (e.g. via an elected board of directors) is part of the EU definition of social enterprise. While democratic and locally based ownership of the assets of an eco-social enterprise is not a condition of democratic governance (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013, chapter 5), ownership and governance issues tend to be linked. We have therefore included both in the criterion.
4. *Rootedness in place and time:* Economic localization is not part of the standard EU definition. However, rootedness in place is a desirable trait in social enterprises (Fraňková and Johanisova 2012). Closing local loops, as when farm manure is ploughed back into a field whence the animals were fed, is connected with the idea of returning surplus to the ecosystem that made the surplus possible (see criterion 2). Rootedness in place can be linked to 'rootedness in time': a regard for past and future as a basic ontology informing the rules and strategy of an eco-social enterprise. For example, as noted, in many cooperatives their equity shares can only be redeemed at their original price, even though the cooperative assets may have grown in value. Such new wealth is seen as indivisible, common wealth (or commons) handed down from past to future.
5. *Non-market production, exchange, or provisioning patterns:* While the EU social enterprise definition emphasizes entrepreneurial behaviour and the monetized economy, our fifth criterion concerns the opposite: the non-market and non-monetized transactions and

behaviour of eco-social enterprises. These can take many forms, e.g. alternative currency systems, volunteer work, positive discrimination in favour of small, local suppliers, or long-term relations of trust and reciprocity replacing pursuit of the lowest price.

THE DIVERSITY OF CZECH ECO-SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Our research revealed a heterogeneous group of eco-social enterprises in terms of scale and length of existence: though most emerged after 1989, some had roots in the socialist period and beyond. The organizational structures of the initiatives varied from informal community groups through non-profits and religious organizations to cooperatives and municipally owned entities, but also a few private businesses and share companies.

Areas of activity were also diverse. In the sphere of food and agriculture, the entire chain was covered, from production (organic farms, community gardens) and processing (an apple juice plant, a distillery, a coffee roastery) to distribution via diverse types of market and alternative channels (cafés, a consumer cooperative, a municipally owned shop). Other areas included education and social services (a community school, a social centre), repair and reuse initiatives (a DIY workshop, charity shops), and sharing and exchange (including online platforms but also car sharing and local currency projects). A couple of projects were involved in renewable energy and several initiatives focused on conservation of biodiversity. A number of the eco-social enterprises were active in the arts and media (a local gallery and theatre, a cooperative newspaper, a community radio). But the initiatives were often involved in more than one sphere of activity:

> The agricultural cooperative Chaloupky started out as an environmental education centre. Its pasture conservation activities inspired its staff to get involved in environmentally friendly agriculture. Today, its educational programmes take place on a fully operational farm, which also processes milk and sheep's wool. During weekends and holidays, the accommodation facilities of the environmental education centre are rented out to tourists. The centre also provides therapeutic programmes for disabled people. The cooperative has founded a work-integration social enterprise (WISE) focused on landscape and nature conservation, organic landscape gardening, and woodworking.

Chaloupky is also a good illustration of the complex development trajectories of Czech eco-social enterprises. While it has benefited from funding packages linked to the EU discourse, and operates in the market to supplement its income, the roots of this and other eco-social enterprises working in the environmental sphere tap into a tradition of nature conservation and environmental education that grows from a socialist past.

The roots of other traditions informing contemporary Czech eco-social enterprises lie even deeper. One of these involves a vibrant tradition of home-grown garden produce, often shared informally among relatives and friends (Jehlička et al. 2018). The shop described below grows from this tradition. Its non-monetized and non-market approaches are a good example of criterion 5 above. We see it as a *de facto* eco-social enterprise, though it would hardly label itself as such:

> A small-town branch of the national non-profit Gardeners' Association runs a shop that sells garden tools and home-grown products brought here by locals. Members, many of them retirees, run the shop on a volunteer basis. Margins from sales are used to finance gardening advice, workshops, and

> fieldtrips offered to the public free of charge. According to one of the functionaries, the shop has existed for 'at least 40 years', predating – and being largely unaware of – the trend of local or organic food. Our question on the non-commercial nature of the initiative left our respondent perplexed: 'We are concerned with promoting the activity . . . We never considered asking any fees. . . . It's like with a neighbour, or someone who is on the same wavelength, they just gladly share experiences, but asking money for it, that's a bit misguided. We see they think alike, they have the same hobby, so we are interested not only in our benefit but also in theirs, we want to support them in the activity. You really caught me by surprise. We never considered asking anything for it'.

Another tradition, harking back to the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, is the institution of the Czech municipality. The country has over six thousand independent municipalities, of which 77 per cent have no more than one thousand inhabitants. Even such small municipalities are legal entities able to own assets, employ staff, and run eco-social enterprises:

> The grocery store in Neslovice is based in a municipal building free of rent, and its staff are municipal employees. Its aim is to enable the 830 inhabitants of the village to buy their groceries locally. It is open to local producers and creates five local jobs. The initiative has no ambition to make a profit, though the shop is expected to cover its own costs.

The EU discourse might not accept the Neslovice shop as an eco-social enterprise, since it is not only unincorporated but it is also controlled by the local municipality rather than by the local community, raising questions about its democratic governance (Fraňková et al. 2018). In our perspective, however, it fulfils all the eco-social enterprise criteria, including criterion 3: on a small scale, municipality and community tend to mesh (Johanisova 2005, p. 90).

The last inspiring tradition pre-dating Communism that we wish to mention is the cooperative tradition. Most of the three-thousand-plus cooperatives in the country today appear little different from capitalist enterprises. Yet there are exceptions. One is the consumer cooperative Konzum:

> Konzum is a regional consumer cooperative with more than 100 shops and 5000 members organized in 54 local groups. It was founded in 1898 and actively promotes cooperative values. On the grounds that Konzum is here for its members and should support their local economy, it sources part of the products it sells (especially meat, bakery, vegetable, and dairy products) from a plethora of local producers, despite higher costs. It puts much of its profits in a reserve fund, often investing in buildings. Its manager commented: 'The cooperative has existed for 115 years, and our own stewardship period is short-term. We have received the cooperative in a certain condition, we will be handing it over to new generations and we should make sure that its state gets better, and not take undue risks'.

There are many tensions within Konzum, such as the issue of profitability vs. keeping local branches open. However, its readiness to source from local suppliers despite higher costs highlights an important issue: just using profits to replenish nature and community (criterion 2) is not enough. If Konzum declined to support local suppliers, these might go bankrupt. If nature is exploited beyond certain limits, species and ecosystems might go extinct. Even profit redistribution will not bring these 'stakeholders' back. Eco-social enterprises thus need to escape from the market logic (i.e. espouse a non-market approach) during their core activities, as indicated in criteria 1 and 5. Sourcing from local suppliers at reasonable prices is one example of this. The use of the word 'stewardship' by the manager indicates an affinity with the 'commons' discourse. The reserve fund can in fact be reframed as a commons, or common

wealth, of the cooperative, seen as an asset owned across generations, as discussed under criterion 4. Such a perspective makes non-market approaches easier to legitimate.

Interestingly, the cooperative tradition has also been picked up by a new generation of radical young people. Tři ocásci is an example of such a cooperative:

> The social cooperative Tři ocásci runs a vegan pub and confectionery, supplied from local, sustainable and ethical sources. Employees are partly drawn from vulnerable groups. The cooperative practises non-hierarchical decision making, and its functioning is strongly anchored in a non-capitalist ethos. One of the founders commented: 'We are a group of left-leaning people and critics of capitalism, so we wanted to get involved with the current system as little as possible. The first way of taking a stand for me was that we didn't take any bank loans to start the café, we borrowed money from friends, about fifteen of them. . . . In our functioning you see the non-commercial nature in many decisions that are unpopular in market terms. For instance, we set the prices in a way to make it accessible for a wide range of people . . . The salaries are set so that we all earn almost the same. The four of us who run the place have agreed that we will take the money we need for a normal life. That means paying rent and some normal things. I think if you count it by the hour, the employees get paid more than us. But this is the way we wanted it'.

The founders of Tři ocásci appear to lean towards anarchism. Other respondents in our study, on the other hand, seemed to draw on a liberal ideology. Basically satisfied with the current system, they emphasized the importance of individual agency and responsibility vs. dependence on the state. Doing things differently was a way of taking care of oneself when institutions failed. Some indicated their belief in the gradual humanization of capitalism via eco-social enterprise – a variant of the 'catching up with the West' narrative.

> Zeměkvítek is a community school founded by 12 families who wanted an alternative to mainstream schools for their children. The school operates four days a week and hires professional teachers, aided by parent volunteers. The initiative uses the clubhouse of the local Scouts group free of charge. Other costs are mostly covered by parents. One of the founders explained her attitude towards subsidies: 'We got into a situation where what we don't arrange and don't pay ourselves . . . we won't have. That leads us, and I think this is why economic alternatives are good, to foster individual responsibility. Being responsible for your own life. I'm convinced that's a base for the viability of any system. Once we start delegating responsibility to people above or besides us, that's the beginning of the end'.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have attempted to make visible some strands of an alternative economy currently in existence in the Czech Republic. Based on our previous work and on the literature, we used the concept of eco-social enterprise and a five-dimensional, sliding-scale research framework, expanding the narrow EU social enterprise definition that has been imported to post-socialist countries in the last ten years. This enabled an inclusive approach and brought to light a wide diversity of eco-social enterprises building on different traditions. Some of these traditions are specific to the region; for example, the strong tradition of food self-provisioning that the European post-socialist countries have in common when compared with Western Europe, and that has until recently been branded as 'backward' (Jehlička et al. 2018). Such specificities of underlying traditions underline the diversity of eco-social enterprises on the ground and the need for a 'weak theory' that would enable hidden economies, excluded by more rigid definitions, to come to light (Gibson-Graham 2008). The research framework we

suggest in this chapter might be a step towards such a theory with regard to alternative and non-capitalist enterprise.

As regards the research results: compared, for example, with Catalonia, where the autonomous economic practices studied by Conill et al. (2012) seem to share a common ideology, and in line with our earlier research on British economic alternatives (Johanisova 2005), Czech eco-social enterprises reveal a broad spectrum of motivations and ideologies, only some of which we have discussed here. What many of our respondents *did* seem to share was a mistrust of the state. At best, they hoped that it would 'leave them alone', although this stance was less pronounced at lower levels of government or in cooperation with specific bodies. In fact, a pronounced distinction emerged in our research between the 'state' and the 'municipal': small and relatively autonomous municipalities, rooted in place and bound by law to fulfil the needs of their citizens, were strongly supportive of some of the eco-social enterprises we studied. This accords with research on India and Ecuador that indicates the crucial role of small municipalities/villages and local government more generally (Lang et al. 2018) in the transition to equitable and sustainable economies beyond capitalism and Communism (as we knew it).

To sum up, our research has brought to light a diverse and hard-to-pigeonhole array of projects, in some ways specific to the region but also sharing some more general qualities common to the new groundswell of alternatives to the mainstream economy in the world today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work of Lucie Sovová on this text was carried out at the Department of Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, and supported within the project n. MUNI/A/0957/2017.

NOTES

1. These countries were characterized by one-party rule and, though formally independent, most were under the ideological, political and economic influence of the Soviet Union. After 1990, the seven original countries split into 13 (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia).

2. By 'authentic' cooperatives, we mean cooperatives adhering to the seven cooperative principles (ICA 2018) that include voluntary membership, democratic member control, and various means of regulating internal financial power concentration and profit distribution. Most Czechoslovakian pre-Second World War cooperatives would have fallen under this heading.
3. This was part of a larger research project, entitled 'Forms and norms of alternative economic practices in the Czech Republic' and supported by the Czech Grant Agency (Project No. 14 – 33094S). It involved (among others) over 50 face-to-face interviews with Czech eco-social enterprises and three focus groups with practitioners. The case studies described in the extracts are condensed characteristics of selected eco-social enterprises investigated. Quotes are taken from interviews and focus group discussion transcripts.
4. There are many synonyms or near-synonyms to our concept of eco-social enterprise, including 'economic alternative', 'community enterprise', 'social solidarity economy', 'alternative economic practice' or 'third system' (Douthwaite 1996, p. 34; Johanisova and Vinkelhoferová (2018); Conill et al. 2012; Johanisova and Fraňková 2017, p. 509; Pearce 2009). Similarly, there are the well-known

concepts of 'alternative capitalist enterprise' and 'non-capitalist enterprise' (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013, p. 13). However, we find the alternative/non-capitalist dichotomy hard to negotiate (e.g. what is still 'capitalist', albeit 'alternative', and what is not?), preferring instead one umbrella concept and one sliding-scale set of criteria.

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