

Competing myths of Czech identity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/nps**Radek Chlup**

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Abstract

The article analyses the current antagonism between the Czech pro-Western liberal democratic discourse and the discourse of national sovereignty from the perspective of long-term conceptions of Czech national identity and the mythical narratives through which they have been expressed. I identify two basic mythical perspectives that have been crucial for the Czechs since the 19th century: the ‘particularist’ and the ‘universalist’. The latter originally only existed as a complement of the former, and it was not until 1968 that it was clearly expressed on its own (in its pro-Western version) in opposition to the particularist myth, eventually becoming the dominant narrative of the 1990s with their ethos of returning to the West. Once the post-revolutionary enthusiasm evaporated, however, the subsequent disillusion again came to be expressed through the particularist myth. While at present the universalist myth might seem as superior to the particularist one, from the perspective of theories of nationalism, both have their bright and dark sides, and it is only due to their present-day opposition that the particularist myth has taken the illiberal turn. A critical reflection of the limitations of both myths might allow us to soften their antagonism.

Keywords

Czech Republic, national myth, nationalism, political myth

In recent years, Czech society has gone through a fundamental political transformation, fittingly designated by Miroslav Balaščík (2019) as ‘a silent revolution’. Whereas in the first two post-revolutionary decades, the dominant tone of public discourse was liberal democratic and pro-Western, in the third decade, a growing number of Czechs started to feel frustrated about the post-communist development of the country. A recent survey has shown that ‘38 percent of over 40 year-olds believe that their lives were actually better under communism. Among those with just a basic education or apprenticeship, the number is as high as 52 percent’ (McEnchroe and Součková, 2019). Another survey has shown that only 47% of the adult Czech population would

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vote in a referendum to stay in the European Union (EU), by far the lowest number of all the post-socialist countries (Hořejš et al., 2019: 4).

In most cases, such attitudes do not seem to result from a critical interest in the functioning of political institutions but are rather ‘a lightning rod for general distrust and disillusionment’ (Hořejš et al., 2019: 9). Yet, while previously such sentiments would have remained individual and dispersed, gradually there started to appear more and more political actors who articulated them by means of various powerful narratives, thus helping to transform them into a ‘shared collective feeling’ (Balaščík, 2019). The most important of these actors has been the president Miloš Zeman, a highly polarizing figure who has been in office since 2013. Through his discourse of representing ‘the real Czech people’ against the renegade cosmopolitan elites, Zeman has helped to effect a deep world-view split in Czech society.

The factors which have contributed to this situation have been various. Some of them are global – after all, a similar polarization of society is now happening in a number of other countries, such as Hungary, Poland, the United States and the United Kingdom. On this global level, the development may plausibly be explained, for example, by the ‘cultural backlash’ of the social conservatives against ‘the silent revolution in cultural values’ (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 32), by ‘the contradictions between the functioning of democracy at the national level and an increasingly global economic market’ (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018: 298) or by shifts in the media landscape and the rise of new media (Moffitt, 2016). On a more local level, we might relate the situation to the specific convolutions of Czech post-revolutionary social and economic development, such as the neoliberal shock therapy of the 1990s, and might look for parallels in other post-communist countries.¹ It is not my aim, however, to pursue these lines of inquiry and analyse primarily the political, social or economic causes of the Czech world-view split, whether local or global. Instead, I examine the antagonism from the perspective of long-term conceptions of Czech national identity and the mythical narratives through which they have been expressed.

From this perspective, I hope to be able to examine the antagonism from a more neutral stand point. This is particularly important in view of the fact that most Czech intellectuals currently share the liberal democratic ethos and discredit opposing views by labelling them as ‘populist’ or ‘nationalist’. The liberal democratic position sees itself as inherently rational and morally superior, denouncing illiberal sentiments as irrational and socially disruptive. While in many individual cases this is true, it is a one-sided perspective which makes critical evaluation of these two positions difficult. By analysing the antagonism in the light of long-term mythical narratives of Czech identity, I would like to uncover a more fundamental level of Czech political discourse that goes beyond the current political issues through which it is expressed. We will thus be able to view the rivalry between ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’ (as I will call the two perspectives) in more neutral light and to see that they have both their bright sides and their dark ones. I will also show that their conflict is only recent, and throughout most periods of Czech history, they were able to cooperate to some extent. This will allow me to suggest some strategies that might be used to soften the antagonism between them and in Czech society.

Theoretical background

Nationalism and its different facets

To understand the general patterns behind Czech conceptions of national identity, it is useful to start with a brief discussion of nationalism and its different facets. Most scholars today see

nationalism as a modern phenomenon. While nations as groups sharing the same cultural heritage had existed even in premodern times, it was only in the 18th century that this cultural heritage became the key to people's social and political identity. Nationalism as 'a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner, 1983: 1), was born as a result of the social and political changes of modernity. These were multifaceted, ranging from the transition from agrarian to industrial society (stressed as the main factor by Gellner) to the rise of 'print-capitalism' allowing readers to imagine themselves as part of the same community (Anderson, 1983). For my purpose, the most important of these changes was connected with the development of the modern sovereign state.

As Breuilly (1996) argues, in premodern times, society was administered by a number of institutions, such as guilds, churches or lordships, each of which was to a large extent autonomous and performed a number of functions, whether economic, cultural or political. From the 18th-century onwards, this model was being replaced by 'a different division of labour, one whereby each of the major social functions was concentrated into particular institutions' (1996: 164). Economic functions were handed over to firms or individuals competing in a free market, religious functions to churches, while political power was delegated to 'specialized bureaucracies under the control of elected parliaments or enlightened despots' (Breuilly, 1996: 164). Whereas previously the state consisted of various groups regulating the lives of their members, it now became a society of individuals. This, however, created the problem of how to ensure that these individuals would feel a loyalty to the distant bureaucratic state similar to that they had until now felt to their guilds, churches or lordships.

According to Breuilly, the first solution offered by Enlightenment intellectuals consisted in envisaging the state as a community of equal citizens participating in liberal and democratic institutions. 'The "nation" in this sense was simply the body of citizens' (Breuilly, 1996: 165). In itself, however, this was too abstract a conception and one at odds with the real, socially structured inequality. It was therefore soon supplemented by a different conception which envisaged citizenship in cultural and ethnic terms, turning national 'cultural identity into a political programme' (Breuilly, 1996: 166). The nation was held together by its shared cultural and linguistic heritage, which made it easier to create the impression of one 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) in which even people who have never met may feel as mutually related. The feeling of communion was greatly helped by the values of the French Revolution: the modern nation was conceived of as an alliance of equal citizen-brothers ready to take part in their country's administration and defence.

These two conceptions – the state as a community of citizens and as a cultural brotherhood – are intrinsic to modern nationalism, though their exact proportion oscillates from case to case. Since they are in fact contradictory, a number of scholars tried to separate them, postulating two different kinds of nationalism: political and cultural, civic and ethnic, liberal and illiberal, universalist and particularist and Western and Eastern (thus, e.g. Kohn, 1944; Plamenatz, 1973). In the former, the membership of the community is defined primarily in political terms through the civic values shared by all the citizens of a state; in the latter, the community is defined through its cultural, ethnic and linguistic heritage. In this model, political nationalism is usually seen as benign and integrative, while cultural nationalism as dangerous and xenophobic.

The distinction between two types of nationalism is useful if these are understood as ideal-typical tendencies, but questionable if these should be seen as representing two essentially distinct nationalisms. As Ben-Israel (1992: 371) argues, there is just one nationalism which always to some extent 'combines both universalist and particularist assumptions', for at heart it consists in

the claim that ‘cultural and ethnic groups implicitly hold political rights’ (1992: 388). Whether the national identity in question is construed more by means of universal values or through particular cultural traditions depends on historical circumstances as well as on the strata of society involved.

When at the turn of the 19th century the nations of Europe started to discover their national identity, depending on their sociopolitical conditions, they generally took one of the two tracks: they either emphasized their unique national history that made them different from all the other nations (cultural nationalism) or stressed the universalist values of freedom, equality and democracy (political nationalism).² Despite their apparent incompatibility, these two strategies were in fact complementary: the unique national achievements were usually closely tied with freedom and democracy, while the universalist values were presented as a result of specific national historical developments (e.g. that of the British with their parliamentary tradition or the French with their Great Revolution) and in effect were no less nationalistic. All the political nations actually pursued strong cultural agenda, assimilating minorities and absorbing ‘the “less civilized” communities into the culture of the dominant’ (Spencer, 2014: 670), as we can see, for example, in the case of Great Britain, the national identity of which is distinctly English (Kumar, 2003: 1–17).

It was only during the 20th century that political and cultural nationalism started to be seen as opposed (and overlaid with the East–West divide) and that political nationalism came to be depicted as ‘relatively benign and liberal compared with the dangerous and xenophobic aspects of cultural, or strong, nationalism’ (Spencer, 2014: 668). A closer look on 19th-century nationalism makes this view untenable. While political nationalism with its stress on universal humanistic values seemingly transcended national parochialism, it simultaneously reinforced it by insisting ‘that one’s own nation was superior to other nations’ (Berger et al., 1999: 10). This was frequently tied to missionary imperialism, such as that of the British, whose ‘tradition of liberty and progress made Britain a better nation than others and justified their “civilising mission” in the Empire’ (Berger et al., 1999: 10). In our times, this is still apparent in the United States with their missionary spread of democracy.

As Spencer and Wollman stress (1998: 256), at the heart of all forms of nationalism

is an essentially exclusionary logic. There must after all always be people who are not part of the nation, the nation is always framed with the presumption of the existence of the outsider, the Other, against which the nation is itself defined and constructed.

When the nationalism in question lays more stress on ethnicity, the Other will be defined as a member of a different ethnic group. When the stress lies on civic values, the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ equals that between civilization and barbarity.

Hence, not only ethnic but also civic nationalisms may demand the eradication of minority cultures and communities qua communities, on the common assumption, shared by Marxists and liberals, . . . that ‘high cultures’ and ‘great nations’ are necessarily of greater value than ‘low’ cultures and small nations. (Smith, 1995: 101)

It follows that ‘civic nationalism . . . is neither as tolerant nor as unbiased as its self-image suggests. In fact, it can be every bit as severe and uncompromising as ethnic nationalisms’ (Smith, 1995: 101). Thus, when, for example, the Jews of France were to become proper French citizens,

they ‘had to divest themselves of their ethno-religious particularity in order to become “universal” individuals “like everyone else”’ (Smith, 1995: 98).

This is not to deny that some forms of nationalism are more benign than others. But the benignity must be assessed in each case individually and not be presumed on account of the principles which are used to delimit the national community in question. The distinction between political and cultural nationalism is a useful analytical tool, but we should beware using it to designate some nations as more ‘backward’, as this would be ‘a sophisticated version of chauvinism’ (Auer, 2004: 96–97) typical of political nationalism in its arrogant mode. Moreover, though I will apply the labels of ‘particularism’ and ‘universalism’ to Czech myths of national identity, we will see that in fact in most cases both aspects will be present, though in varying proportions. At the same time, we will see that both of these types have their darker sides as well, and it is desirable not to fall into the trap of automatically privileging universalism and condemning particularism.

National myths

To inscribe the newly formed ‘imagined community’ deeply into the minds and souls of the prospective members of the nation was not easy. A crucial part in this was played by shared stories of the nation’s past. Typically, they were told by historians, who thus became one of the crucial ‘nation builders’ (Berger and Lorenz, 2010). In the ‘Age of Reason’, they enjoyed great authority thanks to their scientific approach which allowed them to recount the ‘true facts’. Yet, as a number of post-structuralist critics have pointed out, ‘history is always the organisation of the past in terms of a present situation: the selection and organisation of events cannot but reflect our present condition and, as a result, our future hopes and expectations’ (Bottici, 2007: 215). In this regard, history resembles myths, which in traditional societies are crucial for constituting and legitimizing collective identity.

This is not to say that ‘history is largely mythical’ (Friedman, 1992: 207) or that history is ‘the West’s greatest myth’ (Young, 2004: 2). Rather, history has a mythical potential which is not always fulfilled. History organizes events according to a narrative pattern, but as Bottici argues (2007: 203–226), in itself this is not enough to make it mythical. To work as a political myth, a historical narrative needs to be dramatic and to reach some kind of ‘closure’, ‘that summing up of the “meaning” of a chain of events that we normally expect from well-made stories’ (2007: 211).

If myth and history . . . share a narrative form, where they differ is that myth, in order to nourish a determination to act, has to put a drama on the stage, or, rather, it has to be received as a drama. Political myths are stories that make their moral explicit in order to prompt political action. (Bottici, 2007: 215–216)

A historical narrative only becomes mythical when it starts to be perceived as an expression of our collective identity, and one that is dramatic and has a mobilizing power. Nineteenth-century historians were particularly good as providing their historical narratives with drama and moral significance. Scholars of nationalism have thus long regarded them as the chief myth-makers who through their stories of the nations’ pasts have helped to establish their collective identities.

In my analysis, I will mainly deal with various accounts of Czech history, but my interest will be not in history as such but rather in the ‘politics of identity’ that is played out through historical narratives. My aim will be to uncover for the Czech nation its ‘collective imaginaries’, that is, the

symbolic structures that any human group needs for articulating its collective identity, ‘the first references that lie at the core of every culture and that have a very strong hold on society given that they possess an authority akin to sacredness’ (Bouchard, 2017: 8). Collective imaginaries do not just express collective identity, they constitute it and are the vehicle through which this identity is transmitted from one generation to the next. Political myths are one of the main types of collective imaginaries and thus serve as a vehicle ‘of values, beliefs, aspirations, goals, ideals, predispositions, or attitudes’ (Bouchard, 2017: 23). They leave ‘in the collective consciousness an imprint that takes the form of a profound, lasting emotion’ (Bouchard, 2017: 52), such as feelings of humiliation at one’s nation’s loss of sovereignty. By telling dramatic stories of the nation’s past, we may reactivate these emotions at any time and turn them into an ‘ethos’, ‘a set of aspirations, beliefs, principles, values, ideals, moral standards, visions of the world, and attitudes, or deep predispositions’ (Bouchard, 2017: 53). In this way, myths may mobilize members of the nation around its collective goals and visions, but they may equally well evoke feelings of hopelessness or even prompt ‘resentment, hatred, desire for vengeance, and violence’ (Bouchard, 2017: 53).

While my starting point are the mythical aspects of present-day Czech identity discourse, to understand them, it is important to analyse them from a broader perspective. As Bouchard claims, for every society, we may draw a distinction between *master myths* and *derivative myths*. Master myths are the long-term ‘fundamental symbolic arrangements that act as matrices, structure the culture of a society, and govern the formation of other myths’ (Bouchard, 2017: 112). Derivative myths, on the other hand, amount to the particular up-to-date codes through which the master patterns are expressed (Bouchard, 2017: 113).³ Bouchard allows for two or more master myths to coexist in one and the same society, sometimes competing, sometimes complementing one another. This is just what we find in the Czech case, where we may discern two master myths. At present, these correspond precisely to the opposition between the nationalistic and the pro-Western liberal democratic discourse.⁴ It is my contention, however, that the opposition has deeper historical roots and is to be understood in the context of Czech national mythology as it has developed since the 19th century. I will call these long-term master myths *particularist* and *universalist* and will show that throughout most periods of Czech history these were really just two aspects of complex narratives of national identity. It is only recently that they became strictly opposed.

Czech particularist master myth (MMI)

Classic formulation by František Palacký

Particularist myths focus on the nation’s cultural and historical development, which is presented as unique and clearly distinguished from that of the neighbouring nations. Their task is to demonstrate that our nation indeed has the right to be recognized as equal to other nations and thus is entitled to political sovereignty. As Anthony Smith has shown, a crucial part in this is played by the rediscovery of the nation’s glorious past, its ‘golden age’. ‘The greater, the more glorious that antiquity appears, the easier it becomes to mobilize people around a common culture, to unify the various groups of which they are composed and to identify a shared national identity’ (Smith, 1997: 39).

In the Czech case, this particularist master myth was classically formulated in the 19th century by František Palacký (1798–1876), ‘the Father of the Nation’ and official historian of the Bohemian Estates. Palacký located the ‘golden age’ in medieval times, when the Bohemian kingdom was an independent successful state ruled for more than four centuries by the local Přemyslid dynasty, reaching the height of its glory under Charles IV (1316–1378), who also became the Holy

Roman Emperor. However, the true greatness of the Czech nation was only manifested in the 15th century, when the Czechs became the pioneers of church reforms thanks to the figure of Jan Hus, who criticized the vices of the church a 100 years before Luther. He was charged with heresy and summoned to the Council of Konstanz, where he was burned at the stake on 6 July 1415. The result was the Hussite revolution, which took Bohemia by storm and for more than a decade managed to resist the papal crusades. For Palacký, the Hussites were crucial in that they included not just the upper classes but the lower ones as well, that is, they could be seen as a movement of the Czech people in general and one whose nature appears as deeply democratic (Sayer, 1998: 38–39). The Hussites were thus portrayed as precursors not only of the Reformation but of modern democracy as well, thus providing the Czech nation with deep spiritual and moral roots.

The radical Hussites were defeated in 1434, but their ethos lived on throughout the 15th century: in its pure form, Hussitism re-emerged in the Protestant denomination of the Czech Brethren; in its moderate version, it remained politically influential until the beginning of the 17th century. One of the moderate Hussites, George of Poděbrady (1420–1471), was even elected the King of Bohemia in 1458 and unsuccessfully tried to unite Europe by the *Treaty on the Establishment of Peace throughout Christendom*, regarded by Anthony Smith (1999: 225) as a precursor of the EU. With him,

Bohemia once more, and for the last time, entered the wide stage of the world and became a European power; once more it became obvious what important part the Czech nation played in the middle of Europe, what seeds of statehood and humanity it contained and how serious its contribution to the destiny of mankind was. (Palacký, 1931a: 281)

There was also another reason why the Hussites were symbolically important for Palacký. Although the ground of the Hussite movement was religious, to some extent, it was also a fight between the Czech artisan strata against the richer German families, and it resulted in a Czechization of Bohemian towns and the development of Czech language (Sayer, 1998: 41). This allowed Palacký to present perpetual ‘mixing and struggling’ with the Germans as one of the chief principles of the Czech national narrative.⁵ The Germans represented the dangerous Other who explains why the golden age ended and who by analogy threatens Czech identity even in modern times.

In this regard, the story of the fall of medieval Bohemia was no less important than the tale of its original glory. ‘In order for the golden age to be restored by means of a revived ethnic solidarity, it must be seen to have fallen, that solidarity destroyed’ (Mock, 2012: 27). In the Czech case, the fall started in 1526, when the Czech nobility elected a Habsburg, Ferdinand I, to the Bohemian throne. Thus began the rule of the German Habsburgs over the Czech lands, who gradually curbed the autonomy of Czech cities and nobility, incorporating Bohemia into what would eventually become the Austrian Empire. The Protestant nobles rebelled in 1618 but were defeated 2 years later in the Battle of White Mountain, which resulted in the bloody execution of 27 Czech lords on Prague’s Old Town Square in 1621. There followed a violent recatholization and the suppression of Czech national consciousness. A number of leading Czech intellectuals emigrated, and many Czech books were burned. By the late 18th century, most Czechs were Catholics and the upper classes spoke German. It was only in the 19th century that the Czech nation was brought back to life by patriotic intellectuals, dubbed the Awakeners, who recreated literary Czech language, retold Czech history and used it to legitimize Czech political claims.

MM1 is a classic example of a mobilizing ‘myth of defeat’ (Mock, 2012). It tells of the golden medieval age, presents the Czech nation as a heroic precursor of the Reformation, but then depicts its tragic defeat followed by the ‘300 years of darkness’ under Austrian rule. The defeat is fittingly symbolized by the ‘blood sacrifice’ of the Czech nobility in 1621. The sacrifice is presented as traumatic but at the same time as empowering: it is a historical wrong that the modern Czechs are able to redress by means of their constructive effort at building the nation. Since the defeat is seen as unjust, it is compensated by the awareness of moral superiority, which in effect gives the Czechs the rightful claim to a state of their own. It was thus precisely on the basis of this myth that the Czech language and culture could be resurrected and developed in the 19th century and that Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk during WWI managed to persuade the Western powers that the Czechs (together with the Slovaks) need to form an independent state.

Development of the particularist myth in the 20th century

MM1 proved immensely influential and long-lasting. By the end of the 19th century, it was embraced by most Czech patriots, though their interpretations differed in a number of points. It was the reception and modified reproduction of Palacký’s narrative by Czech artists and school teachers who actually turned it into a full-fledged myth, that is, a narrative that is being continually reproduced and adapted to new contexts by a wide range of social actors (Bottici and Challand, 2013: 90–91; Bouchard, 2017: 80–83). Thanks to the particularist myth, the Czechs did indeed start to think of themselves as forming one national community with clear-cut borders and identity.

MM1 became the founding myth of the First Czechoslovak Republic. It is symptomatic that one of the first major political steps of the new state, the land reform that deprived the largely foreign nobility of property, was presented as ‘undoing’ the White Mountain tragedy. There were dissenting voices, of course, especially among the Catholics, many of whom found it difficult to accept the Hussites and the Protestant nobility of the White Mountain as their national heroes (cf. Paces, 1999). In the end, however, all they managed was to mitigate the myth’s anti-Catholic tendencies by supplementing it with other Christian figures not linked with the Hussites, such as St Wenceslas (Šebek, 2016: 161–172).

German WWII propaganda tried its best to break the myth, but in the end, its effect was the very opposite. The ‘events of 1938–45 so brutally confirmed the old stereotypes’ of the Germans as the oppressors that Palacký’s master myth ‘could be revived and mobilized as a central component of postwar reconstruction’ (Sayer, 1998: 223). After the war, most Czechs saw it as completely natural that the body of the nation should be ‘cleansed’ of the ‘German traitors’ once for all. The expulsion of the Germans from Czechoslovakia was described as yet another ‘undoing’ the White Mountain and as the final completion of the Hussite fight (Spurný, 2011: 30–37). As a text in the journal of the Resettlement Office *Osidlování* put it in 1946:

just as in those times the Hussite armies were driving away the foreign hordes after having defeated them in battles admired by the whole world, even so we are now, after the greatest world war, completing what was gloriously started by them. (quoted in Spurný, 2011: 33)

Not even the communist coup in 1948 undermined the importance of MM1. On the contrary, Zdeněk Nejedlý, the first Minister of Culture and Education in the communist republic, adapted Palacký’s master myth to the new paradigm by shifting attention from the Czech *nation* to the Czech *people*. The Czech people already played an important part in Palacký’s myth: it was them

in whom the national democratic spirit was truly embodied and thanks to whom it was able to survive the darkness period (Činátl, 2011: 81–82). For Nejedlý, the Czech people amounted to the proletariat who had long been exploited not just by the feudal Germans but by the Czech nobility and bourgeoisie in general, but whose interests were now finally represented by the Communist Party (Činátl, 2011: 209–301). In the same vein, the Hussites were reinterpreted and glorified as proto-communist revolutionaries. Since the basic national conflict was now portrayed as a class struggle, the Germans were no longer the enemy par excellence, but they still played an important mythical part as the evil Nazis defeated by the Soviet communist army. As a result, all the basic mythical patterns established by Palacký remained in place, greatly helping to make the communist interpretation of history acceptable.

Particularism and universalism combined

Universalist aspects of MM1

While the particularist myth defines the nation through its unique ethnic, cultural and historical heritage, the universalist myth celebrates the nation's civilizational, moral and spiritual achievements. At first sight, this might appear to go directly against the particularist ethos: whereas particularism aims at establishing a clear distinction between 'our' nation and various 'others', universalism seemingly unites all 'civilized' humankind into a community of shared moral values. Rather than being in opposition, however, both types of myth are usually used complementarily. As we have seen, nationalism from its very beginning combined the universalist idea of political sovereignty of the people with the particularist cultural and ethnic delimitation of the people in question. As a result, even the ethnic myths of descent do not just trace the alleged blood ties with our ancestors. In most cases, they also postulate some kind of 'ideological "fit" with the presumed ancestors' (Smith, 1999: 58). Their aim is 'to recreate the heroic spirit' of these ancestors, to trace 'the persistence of certain kinds of "virtue" or other distinctive cultural qualities' (Smith, 1999: 58). Ancient national heroes thus usually turn out to be the ideological predecessors of modernity, and it is thanks to this that they may be used for mobilizing the nation.

Palacký's myth is a case in point. The controversial Hussites, regarded by previous Czech historians as anarchic rebels, were chosen by him as the nation's true heroes precisely because of the 'democratic' and spiritual values they fought for. As a result, the aim of Palacký's myth was not just to trace the ethnic descent of the Czechs, but more importantly to elevate the nation, to show it as fundamentally civilized and prepared for modernity. This aspect was even more stressed in Masaryk's reinterpretation of the myth. 'Masaryk argued that a nation is not an accidental cluster of anthropologically similar humans but a body of conscious individuals bound together by a shared system of values. This bond he called a "programme"' (Suda, 2001: 231). In the Czech case, the national 'programme' was supposed to consist in the humanism of the Hussites and the Czech Brethren, and Masaryk attempted to turn this humanitarian democratic ethos into one of the pillars of the newly established state. 'Humanity can be seen as our national task prepared and bequeathed to us by the Brethren: the humanitarian ideal is the entire meaning of our national life' (Masaryk, 1908: 183). During his presidency, Masaryk actively spread the image of Czechoslovakia as 'an island of democratic values, rationalism, and fair mindedness amid a Europe falling quickly into the thrall of authoritarianism and fascism' (Orzoff, 2009: 11).

The universalist aspect was even stronger in the communist version of MM1. For communists, national identity was just a road to social emancipation, not an aim in itself. Indeed, at first sight, the communist universal values might appear as entirely incompatible with nationalism. Yet, as

Lenin and Stalin saw already, it was only through ethnic emancipation that lofty socialist values could be internalized by the masses (Slezkine, 2000; Spurný, 2011: 82–88). The Czech communists followed suit. They accepted the post-war nationalist and anti-German discourse but at the same time were able to moderate its excesses. Thus while originally strongly supporting the expulsion of the Germans, they later took care that the few remaining Germans could join in the building of socialism (Spurný, 2011). In effect, the communist variety of nationalism was more political than cultural.

Interestingly enough, it was only during the 1938–1945 period that MM1 was almost completely rid of universalist aspects. The Munich Agreement of 1938 led to the collapse of regime established by Masaryk. The First Republic with its liberal democratic values was suddenly believed to have failed. Prominent Czech politicians and intellectuals blamed the universalist part of the national myth. ‘Masaryk’s ideal of the struggle for universal, panhuman moral values in which the meaning and substance of national life should consist has been abandoned by the majority of the nation. In those realistic times it seemed superfluous’ (Tesař, 2000: 134). Instead, the sole aim became ‘mere national survival’ (Tesař, 2000: 163). The result was an escalated particularist nationalism full of anti-Jewish and anti-Roma measures. ‘In all parts of the federal Czecho-Slovak Republic, one of the most pressing questions on the political agenda was how to make the dominant “nation” – whether Czech, Slovak or Ukrainian/Rusyn – attain “national purity” (hegemony) within its claimed territory’ (Heimann, 2009: 98).

Universalist geopolitical master myth (MM2)

While most versions of the particularist myth have a universalist aspect as well, we may in fact distinguish versions of the national myth which are universalist in a stronger sense. In the Czech case, these are connected with what a number of international relations scholars have termed ‘geopolitical imagination’, understood as ‘the results of subjects’ attempts to make sense of the world by associating political values with various parts of that map’ (Dimtter and Dodds, 2008: 447; cf. Eberle, 2018: 175). Geopolitical imagination is a natural complement of the historical imagination: just as the latter projects the values that constitute the nation’s identity into the past, the former projects it onto the symbolic world map. As we have seen in case of the historical imagination, the values are basically of two kinds. (1) An ideal glorious self-image of the nation is located in its ‘golden age’. This image defines the ‘true self’ of the nation but also ‘provides it with a hidden direction and goal beneath the obscuring present’ to be ‘recreated in its visionary future’ (Smith, 1997: 51). (2) The golden age is destroyed by the dangerous Other, against whom the nation must unite. The same two types can be seen in the geopolitical imagination. The symbolic geographic space serves as a projection screen both for the various ‘others’ against which our identity needs to be secured and for the positive values with which we wish to identify.

In case of the Czech Republic, the crucial geopolitical imagination is tied with the West–East distinction, which in the 18th century travellers and philosophers from Enlightenment Western Europe invented to highlight the civilizational achievement of the West in comparison with the relative barbarity of the East (Wolff, 1994). The ‘West’ in this sense is not a geographical category but a symbolic one. As Hall (1995: 186) puts it, a ‘western’ society is one ‘that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern’, and ‘the meaning of this term is therefore virtually identical to that of the word “modern”’. In this regard, the West–East distinction is a universalist category. But as Case points out (2009: 111), national elites quickly

appropriated it in their ‘desire to associate or disassociate their nation’s course with/from that of their near or more distant neighbors in order to achieve localized, generally “national” goals’.

The result is what is frequently called ‘the East-West slope’, which ‘divides the world into the West proper and a series of Easts, differentiated from one another according to their level of similarity/difference with the Western core’ (Eberle, 2018: 177–178; cf. Kuus, 2007; Melegh, 2006). Each European nation thus usually insists that ‘we’ are still essentially ‘Western’ and it is only with our eastern neighbours that the ‘real East’ begins. In the symbolic geopolitics of identity, the West stands for the ideal self-image of the nation, while the East for the dangerous Other who casts this self-image in doubt. In many cases, the geopolitical imagination merges with the historical one, and even the nation’s past becomes a proof of its ‘Westernness’. In the Czech case, this would be the case of the Hussites as the precursors of the Reformation (that essentially Western movement), and at present even the case of the First Republic, understood as our ‘last direct personal experience of the West’ (Kundera, 1984: 36; cf. Eberle, 2018).

To return to myths of Czech national identity, the difference between those that are basically particularist (though with indispensable universalist touches) and those that are universalist *sensu stricto* lies in the fact that the former sees the dynamics of the nation’s history as mainly governed by its own internal rules, while the latter sees it as a larger geopolitical dynamics of which the Czech nation is but a part. In other words, whereas particularists see the outside world as chiefly a source of the dangerous Others, universalists see it also as a source of some of the nation’s positive moral values.

In this regard, Palacký’s myth is particularist at heart, for though it does have a strong geopolitical dimension, depicting the Czechs as ‘mixing and struggling’ with other, mightier nations (particularly the Germans), it assigns no substantial positive part to it. Czech national development is pictured as having a clear trajectory of its own, striving towards democracy and humanism. Geopolitics is secondary, sometimes helping but more frequently obstructing the dynamics of this development. The Czech nation is thus seen within MM1 as an active subject of history with a distinct international mission. ‘In their historical development and progress, the Czechs were isolated and left solely to themselves’ (Palacký, 1931b: 351). When the Czechs do enter the stage of world history, it is by actively initiating new spiritual impulses, which are sadly ignored by others. ‘According to this image of the past, Czech history is the history of a nation which often made European history through its actions but was frequently blocked by its powerful neighbours because its ideas were ahead of their time’ (Holý, 1996: 119; cf. Činátl, 2011: 128).

A more balanced conception is offered by Masaryk. He follows Palacký in attributing to the Czech nation a historical dynamics of its own, seeing the Hussites as the precursors of the Reformation and of modern democracy. At the same time, however, he regards this dynamics as parallel to the dynamics of world history, conceived as an inevitable progress towards humanitarian democracy to which the Czechs were now making their own unique contribution. In his view, WWI was a part of a world revolution in which modern republican democracy wins over medieval absolutist theocracy. The leader of the democratic block was the United States, but the Czechs too made their specific contribution with their national humanistic tradition going back to the Hussites. ‘The Czecho-Slovak question is a world question and is the problem of this very war; free Bohemia, or reactionary Austria, the free Czecho-Slovak nation or the degenerate Habsburgs – that is the choice for Europe and America’ (Masaryk, 1918: 57).

In this way, Masaryk achieved a harmonious synthesis of the particularist MM1 with a universalist geopolitical myth (MM2). In Bouchard’s terminology (2017: 116–117), he managed to create an ‘archemyth’ in which different master myths ‘are combined around an idea or a crucial

aspiration that functions as a matrix and catalyst; as a consequence, their hold and their effects are reinforced', which in turn profoundly affects the course of society 'because of the energy (and synergy) it produces'. It is for this reason that Masaryk's First Republic is nowadays admired by the fans of both MM1 and MM2 and that we may legitimately regard it as being based both on cultural nationalism (which the German minority occasionally found hard to accept) and on political nationalism (which made Czechoslovakia a decent place to live in even for many of the Germans). It was only after Hitler's rise to power that the international political situation made it increasingly difficult for this archemyth to hold together.

Interestingly enough, already in Masaryk's time, there was an attempt to offer a pure universalist geopolitical myth that would dispense with particularism altogether. Its chief propagator was the Catholic historian Josef Pekař, who refused to see Czech history as a unique achievement of the Czech nation, insisting that its development 'is determined mainly by the influence, paradigm, effort and spirit of Western Europe' (Pekař, 1990: 387). Yet, respected as Pekař was, his account failed to turn into a true myth, that is, a narrative accepted and retold by significant members of the public and used by them to justify their political claims. The first Czechoslovak republic was dominantly based on MM1, and the public was only ready to accept the universalist geopolitical myth as its complement, not as its replacement.

Masaryk's synthesis of MM1 and MM2 was shaken after 1938. Whereas Masaryk allied the First Republic with France and the United Kingdom, in consequence of what was perceived as the 'Munich betrayal' the Czechs no longer trusted the West, overwhelmingly turning to the USSR for protection after the war (Abrams, 2004: 104–117). It was this that prepared the ground for the rise of the communists who managed to combine MM1 with MM2 in the same way that Masaryk did – only this time the 'world revolution' was that of the international proletariat led by the USSR (Gellner, 1992: 188–189). The symbolic values of the West and the East were thus reversed, the East now standing for universal social progress.⁶ The ground for such a reversal had been prepared by the Slavophile sentiments that were influential especially in the first half of the 19th century.⁷

Towards an independent universalist master myth

1968 and Beyond: MM1 and MM2 part ways

Significantly, while in Masaryk's synthesis, the two myths were basically equal, in the communist archemyth, MM1 was subordinated to MM2. The victory of the international proletariat was the ultimate aim not to be disputed by the Czechs. It was this setting that ultimately led to the downfall of the communist archemyth. At first, it was highly successful: the communists won the free 1946 elections, and even after the 1948, they enjoyed substantial popular support (Spurný, 2011: 335–343). The reversal came in 1968, when the Czech nation took its long-cherished part of the pioneers of humanist progress all too seriously and, with their reformed 'socialism with a human face', got into conflict with the Soviet leaders of world revolution. The ensuing Soviet occupation was an inverse repetition of the events of 1938–1939 and led to the collapse of the pro-Russian geopolitical myth. The 'normalization' regime suppressed the particularist myth of autonomous Czech socialism and attempted to restore the previous mythical synthesis of MM1 and MM2, but with limited success. In effect, communist ideology – including its interpretation of history – came to be seen as something absurd and imposed from without, and the Russians quickly replaced the Germans in the part of the national archenemy. The result was a schizophrenic split between

outwardly expressed loyalties and opinions held in private. Thanks to this split even Palacký's master myth was greatly weakened after the collapse of communism, being all too associated with its black-and-white communist adaptation.⁸

It was in the aftermath of the Russian invasion that a full-fledged alternative international master myth (MM2) began to develop in dissident circles. It can already be glimpsed in the 1968–1969 polemics between Milan Kundera and Václav Havel (Auer, 2008; West, 2009). Whereas Kundera tried to make sense of the current state of affairs in terms of MM1, seeing the historical mission of the Czech nation in its attempt to humanize socialism and peacefully assert its cultural uniqueness against imperial pressures for uniformity, Havel ridiculed Kundera's vision as hubristic, insisting that the idea of 'socialism with a human face' was unrealistic anyway, and all the reforms of 1968 meant was a partial return to the democratic normality of the West. For the first time in Czech modern history, the universalist master myth was not a complement of the particularist myth but was clearly opposed to it. The subsequent development soon showed Havel's outlook as more realistic. When in 1984 Kundera published his famous essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, he was already himself clearly on the side of MM2, seeing the ground of Czech identity in its 'Westernness'.

The clearest expression of the new independent universalist master myth was provided by the dissident philosopher Jan Patočka in his turn-of-the-1970s treatise *What Are the Czechs?* Patočka followed Pekař by insisting that the fate of the Czech nation does not depend on its own internal dynamics but mainly on the civilizational development of Western Europe. It is only when the Czechs are in touch with great nations of the West and spread their values in the East that they attain national greatness. This is what happened in the Middle Ages, Patočka narrates, when Přemysl Otakar II adopted an expansionist imperial policy (extending his kingdom down to the Adriatic Sea),⁹ Charles IV made Prague the capital of an eastward-facing Holy Roman Empire (with Bohemia as an 'advanced prong' of the West piercing the East – Patočka, 2006: 270), and the Hussites anticipated the Reformation. After the defeat at the White Mountain, Bohemia was cut off from the progressive Protestant West, was exploited by the Habsburgs and fell into petty provincialism.

Patočka has no respect for Czech cultural particularism whatsoever. It is not surprising, therefore, that his view of the 19th-century 'national awakening' is rather contemptuous. When at the end of the 18th century, the modern Czech nation started to be formed, it had little in common with medieval Bohemia: for Patočka, it was a nation of 'slaves liberated from above' (Patočka, 2006: 323), built from below by the lower and middle classes, the upper classes of society being all German. The main instrument of Czech nation-making was cultural linguistic nationalism, which in Patočka's view once again confined the Czechs to their pettiness, making the survival of a linguistic minority their sole aim. Masaryk tried to return the Czechs on the world stage by making them a part of the democratic world revolution, but the republic that he established also came to be based chiefly on cultural linguistic nationalism. In the end, claims Patočka, this proved fatal. While Masaryk aspired to greatness, he found no followers. His successor Beneš again succumbed to pettiness: he was 'a weak person, good as a secretary, but nothing more' (Patočka, 2006: 322). When in 1938 Beneš had the chance to lead the nation to a brave fight (although one that could not be won), he gave up. 'In doing so, he broke down the moral backbone of a society that was ready to fight, and he did so not just for the moment but for a long time, the entire war period and the times that followed' (Patočka, 2006: 321).

The dominance of MM2 in the 1990s

After the Velvet Revolution, the universalist geopolitical myth developed by Patočka and other dissidents became the official narrative of Czech identity. Its most influential proponent was Václav Havel, with his vision of the Czech return to the bosom of the democratic West, his stress on universal humanistic values, as well as his support of their military spread: it is not a coincidence that Havel was a defender of US invasion of Iraq and of NATO's intervention in Kosovo (Auer, 2006: 423; Holubec, 2015: 224–225, 235–236). Hand in hand with this went Havel's declaration of 'a relentless war on Czech provincialism, isolationism and egoism, on all illusions about a clever neutrality, on our traditional short-sightedness, on all kinds of Czech chauvinism' (Havel, 1997). Havel certainly did not want to dissolve the Czechs in the West. National identity was still important for him but in strictly universalist sense. In an interview with Adam Michnik, Havel (1992) followed Masaryk by locating Czech identity in a sense of a broader humanist responsibility:

Whenever Czech politics was egotistic, it was unsuccessful. When it was understood that the stability and prosperity of the Czech lands is only possibly against the background of wider Central European stability, it was successful. This sense of responsibility, this feeling that the Czech concern is a human concern [*věc česká je věc lidská*], that it concerns all humanity, can be found in St Wenceslas, Charles IV, George of Poděbrady, Comenius, Masaryk, Patočka. In Czech history it reappears again and again. (emphasis added).

Originally, Havel even nursed the idea that the Czechs might transform their unique experience of communist suffering into a moral lesson for the West (most notably in his 1990 address to the US Congress), in this way suggesting a cooperation between universalism and particularism. But with time, ambitions of this kind receded.

For more than a decade, it seemed that MM1 with its particularist nationalism was a thing of the past. When the anthropologist Ladislav Holý did his fieldwork in Czechoslovakia in 1992, he noted an almost total disavowal of nationalism by the Czechs. 'Nationalism is something that plagues others – Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, and the various nations of the former Soviet Union – but not the Czechs' (Holý, 1996: 189). Holý was not fooled and concluded that far repudiating national pride the 'denial of Czech nationalism is part of the construction of a positive image of the Czech nation' (1996: 189). In accordance with the geopolitical imagination of the East–West slope, the Czechs found their identity in their rational and civilized Westernness which has nothing to do with the chauvinist follies of the Eastern nations.

In retrospect, one can detect the seeds of MM1 even in the 1990s. In contrast to Havel's universalist position, there stood the particularist approach of the Prime Minister Václav Klaus with his 'Eurorealism' (as he calls his Czech version of Euroscepticism) and the stress of Czech national interests defying any international dictate (Holubec, 2015: 227–229). In the same vein, he was critical of NATO's interventions in Yugoslavia which in his eyes went against the principle of national sovereignty (Auer, 2006: 423; Holubec, 2015: 236). Still, in the 1990s, Klaus was rather modest in his views advocating more or less a combination of MM1 and MM2,¹⁰ seeing Czech national interests as firmly grounded in the Anglo-Saxon ideal of liberal economy and in the free market characteristics of the 'civilized' world to which Czech society now, again, aspired (Holý, 1996: 151). It was only in the 2000s, when he succeeded Havel as president, that he fully developed his MM1 position. In the 1990s, the widely shared ethos was that of the Czech return to the West.

Particularism and universalism opposed

The dominance of MM2 started to crumble at the turn of the new millennium. The return to the West was slower than many had expected, and the painful and not always successful neoliberal economic transformation of the 1990s created a number of frustrations. By the end of the decade, there was growing disillusionment with the new elites, as a number of corruption scandals started to transpire. Moreover, in the 2000s, Czech society became increasingly stratified, some taking advantage of the new economic and social possibilities, others facing restraint and unemployment. In a recent sociological survey organized by Czech Radio, 17.6% of the population were classified as an 'impoverished class' and 22.2% as an 'endangered class' (Prokop et al., 2019). All of this made it more and more difficult for many to accept the official narrative of a glorious return to Western normality.

The disillusionment first started to backfire against Havel, who for many Czechs turned from a symbol of the hopes of the Velvet Revolution into that of their subsequent frustration, epitomizing the hypocritical elites (now denounced as 'truth-n-loveniks' or 'Havelists') who had betrayed the nation's interests in favour of a one-sided pro-Western liberal democratic approach. A number of Czechs started to view the post-communist period as just another mythical 'dark age', accusing the ruling elites of corruption and of having replaced the social security of the communist period with ruthless antisocial capitalism. Although Havel himself had nothing to do with this, he came to be seen by many as a politician who through his universalist 'truth-n-love' sweet talk created a smokescreen that allowed others to misappropriate the country's wealth through its mismanaged privatization. Hand in hand with this, the geopolitical side of the universalist myth started to crumble as well: Havel's support of US invasions in Iraq and NATO's intervention in Kosovo has come to be seen by many a sign his alliance with Western imperialism threatening Czech national sovereignty.

It is ironic that the blame for the post-revolutionary frustrations was put on Havel rather than on Klaus, who was actually more directly responsible for the wild 1990s economic privatization. From the mythological perspective, this makes sense, however. The frustration resulted from the failure of the universalist ambition to catch up with the West and was therefore associated with Havel as the main representative of the pro-Western myth. In effect, Havel came to be seen as standing for the cosmopolitan elites who side with global capitalism rather than with the members of their own nation. Klaus, on the other hand, was by the end of the 1990s already quite explicit in his Eurosceptic discourse of national sovereignty, which symbolically dissociated him from similar suspicions.

With Klaus, MM1 returned into Czech political discourse, but its influence was still limited. In the 2000s, MM2 was still the norm, and Klaus's Euroscepticism was regarded by most elites as a marginal aberration. The true comeback of MM1 only took place in 2013, when direct presidential elections took place for the first time (until then, the president used to be elected by the Parliament). In the Czech Republic, the president is primarily a symbolic figure, but precisely for this reason the elections turned into an emotion-packed arena of combat between different mythical visions. Inevitably, the fight was between MM1 and MM2 (Červinková and Kulhavá, 2013).

The latter was represented by Karel Schwarzenberg, a 73-year old, cosmopolitan aristocrat who spent most of his life in Austria, between 1990 and 1992 served as lead advisor to Václav Havel, and is now supported by the liberal-democratic elites. His rival, who won in the end, was Miloš Zeman, Czech prime minister in from 1998 to 2002 and returning to politics after a period of retirement. Zeman adopted a distinct MM1 discourse, presenting himself as a defender of Czech

national interests, who (unlike his rival) has always lived in the Czech Republic and ‘has never betrayed it’ (Červinková and Kulhavá, 2013: 21). At one point, the debate even touched the 1945 expulsion of the Germans, which Schwarzenberg designated as a serious violation of human rights, a view Zeman indignantly rejected, accusing his rival of ‘speaking like a Sudeten German, not like a president’ (Richter, 2013). During the years of his presidency, Zeman’s nationalist discourse has grown even stronger: he has more or less turned into a Eurosceptic (Koreň, 2018), and one of his main themes is the issue of national security face to face with the alleged Islamic threat (Naxera and Krčál, 2018). In the 2018 presidential elections, the same situation happened again: this time the defeated candidate of the liberal pro-European elites was Jiří Drahoš, former head of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

The presidential elections have fully rehabilitated MM1 in Czech political discourse. Its concrete contents are now largely different from those picked by Palacký, drawing from Czech 20th-century history rather than from the Middle Ages.¹¹ Still, the basic particularist pattern remains the same. What was the reason for the renewed attraction of national particularism? A convincing answer has been offered by Miroslav Balašík (2019). According to him, after 1989, the Czechs tried to forget about their troublesome communist past, defining their identity rather in terms of bright visions of the future – namely the perspective of ‘catching up with the West’. This went hand to hand with the European integration, which shows a similar tendency, attempting to replace conflicting national pasts with the image of harmonious collaboration of various countries in both present and future. ‘The problem is that the identification with the European project is possible mainly for those whose capabilities are utilizable in the world of integration and globalization; the others are largely left abandoned and uncared-for’ (Balašík, 2019). An obvious solution for this ‘abandoned’ group was to find its identity once more in the shared historical past rather than the hypothetical ideal future.

Zeman has quickly seized the opportunity that this situation offers. Not only does he claim to be ‘the president of the lower ten million’ (the total population of the Czech Republic being 10.6 million), who defends the true interests of the people against the liberal intellectual elite, dubbed by him ‘the Prague Café’ (Hornát, 2015).¹² Even more importantly, he tries to renew the continuity with the communist past by freeing it from moral evaluation. He does so, for example, by honouring various personalities connected with the communist regime, by refusing to ostracize the communist party or by rejecting the black-and-white elite discourse which presents Putin’s Russia as the nation’s chief enemy. ‘In other words, he tries to integrate the communist era into the history of the nation as part of its narrative, not as a source of guilt and historical traumas’ (Balašík, 2019). In this way, he offers a feasible concept of national identity for those who have lost faith in the universalist myth.¹³

In comparison with previous periods of Czech history, the present-day situation is unique in that MM1 and MM2 are diametrically opposed and at the same time more-or-less equally strong.¹⁴ The result is a situation Bouchard (2017: 147) describes as *antinomy*, a state of ‘irreconcilable divisions between master myths, which can inhibit the movement of a society’. Understandably, both sides of the dispute typically react to it by defending their perspective and denouncing the other, in this way deepening the divide and making it look insurmountable.

Myths and their interpretation

Mythical criticism

At present, the debate between the proponents of MM1 and MM2 is quite escalated. The universalists (who still have much of the mainstream media on their side) describe MM2 as beneficial

in that it defends the laudable values of democratic plurality, human rights and tolerance for social and ethnic minorities. MM1, on the other hand, is seen by them as a dangerous tool in the hands of populist politicians, who are resurrecting the spectre of Czech nationalism. The particularists, on the other hand, praise MM1 for safeguarding cherished national traditions and sovereignty and present MM2 as endangering the Czech nation by irresponsible Western multiculturalism and ‘social engineering’ and by selling out the country to global capitalists.

What is more, the two myths are wedged into each other, so to speak: by presenting the other myth as dangerous, each side drives the other to defend its position as strongly as possible. The cycle of defence and counter-defence increases the tension, so that in effect the myths paradoxically reinforce each other. This makes it all the more difficult to step out of the vicious circle. All attempts at persuading the other side just intensify the pressure, leading nowhere.

Can anything be done about this regrettable situation? The usual advice of Czech intellectuals is to step out of mythical patterns and use critical reason as much as possible. A good example is the historian Eva Hahnová, who in her book *Czechs on the Czechs* sets out to debunk various ‘simplistic images of Czech history and stereotypical depictions of the Czech nations’ (2018: 14) that abound in contemporary public discourse. These basically amount to what I call ‘myths’, but Hahnová’s evaluation of them is entirely different. She regards them as ‘historical stereotypes’, that is, as judgemental and emotionally charged rhetorical images of human communities, which are dangerous in that they ‘help to emotionalize public communication and to weaken respect for people with different opinions, political opponents, ancestors, traditions, and historical data’ (2018: 16). As an alternative to them, she advocates a sensitive historical approach that avoids essentializing simplifications and focuses on the internal plurality, changeability and transnational embeddedness of the Czech nation.

Reasonable as Hahnová’s approach might sound, it does not seem realistic given the current strength of these mythical stereotypes. Cultivating critical historical consciousness is useful for *preventing* the public debate from getting too emotional, but once it already *is* imbued with emotions, these cannot usually be dispelled simply by being replaced by rational analyses. Moreover, if we are to take seriously Bouchard’s conception of the ‘collective imaginaries’, getting rid of myths is impossible, for it would mean losing the symbolic structures that any human group needs for defining its collective identity. Following Bouchard, therefore, I suggest the solution lies in the very opposite strategy: not so much in dispensing with myths as with learning to understand and cultivate them. While getting rid of myths is both impossible and ultimately undesirable, we may attempt to reduce their intolerant and black-and-white aspects by submitting them to critical reflection and learning to step back from them and see them in their wider context.

An important step towards such a critical reflection consists in learning to see what we might call the *shadow* of each myth. Each myth is one-sided in some regard, each is simplifying, favouring certain aspects of reality at the expense of others. Each contains features which might be beneficial when developed moderately but destructive when becoming dominant. Each includes some degree of repression, masking the society’s ‘abdications, faults, denials, and failures, often by placing the blame on others’ (Bouchard, 2017: 26). Present-day Czech intellectuals find it easy to criticize contemporary forms of MM1, pointing out that they rouse fear, produce xenophobia, polarize society and create artificial enemies. It is much more challenging for them to critically evaluate MM2, inasmuch as it generates an open-minded, liberal democratic, cosmopolitan ethos that presents itself as morally superior. It is therefore precisely a criticism of MM2 that I would like to focus upon.

Dark sides of universalism

The basic weaknesses of MM2 are the same as those I have already sketched in my theoretical introduction for political nationalism (of which MM2 is a symbolic expression). We have seen that despite its seemingly open arms, political nationalism too follows the ‘exclusionary logic’, keeping out of the national community those who are considered ‘backward’ or forcing them to assimilate. Due to its claim to moral superiority, it sometimes shows arrogance towards those who are deemed not sufficiently civilized. Due to its universalism, it tends towards an imperialist spread of its values – but at the same time takes care that the nations thus ‘civilized’ are still pictured as not ‘Western’ enough and are thus disqualified from membership in the political community.

Can we discern such tendencies in the Czech versions of MM2? I believe we can. The best starting point is Patočka, whose version of the myth is illuminating in its radicalism: crucial patterns of the myth are spelled out so clearly that even their shadowy aspects become visible. As several scholars have pointed out (Hahnová, 2015: 113–149; 2018: 71–80; Tucker, 1996: 212), Patočka’s basic distinction between the ‘great’ nations spreading universal ideals and civilization and the ‘petty’ nations that need to submit to this missionary spread is embarrassingly close to the German national myths of the 1930s. It is precisely this ‘imperialist’ aspect that today’s adherents of MM1 react against when they condemn Havel’s support of the NATO intervention in Kosovo or when the more radical of them see the EU as finally realizing Hitler’s dream of ‘Ostkolonisation’ (Colonisation of the [Germany’s] East). Extravagant as such accusations are, they do intuit MM2’s shadow correctly, making just the mistake of taking literally what is only a latent tendency. A critical analysis of MM2 should thus take these accusations seriously but to view them rather as imaginative blow-ups which in the manner of dream images tell us something that in fact only amounts to a propensity.

On a more subtle level, this propensity manifests itself in the East–West discourse that has been embraced by Czech elites. While seemingly ‘objective’ (who could dispute that the Western countries are more developed?), in fact it is not a neutral description of reality but a way of establishing a system of unequal power relations through which the West establishes its dominance (Hall, 1995: 203–205). Within the EU, this corresponds to what Böröcz (2006: 129–130) calls ‘the rule of European difference’, namely the ‘insistence that, within Europe, goodness is distributed unevenly’ on the West–East axis, being greatest in the Western part with which the East can catch up ‘only if, and to the extent that, western Europe extends its geopolitical reach over it’ (this being ‘the *longue-durée*, transcendental purpose of the European Union’s “eastern enlargement”’). In effect, as Bottici and Challand put it (2013: 77), Western part of the EU perceives itself as having ‘the right recipe for a common democratic life’ which needs to be ‘exported’ to the immature ‘teenage democracies’ in the Eastern part. It is not surprising that many of the Easterners view this as soft version of colonialism and have a tendency to rebel against the West. As Krastev and Holmes (2018) have plausibly argued, the rise of illiberalism in Eastern Europe may be explained precisely as a rebellion against the Western claim that to be normal is to be like the West and that the post-communist countries should simply imitate the West as much as possible and be evaluated by Western standards.

What is even more important for present-day political debates is that Patočka and his post-revolutionary followers build their narrative of Czech identity around ‘the stereotype of a dichotomic split of the nation into two qualitatively distinct parts, the enlightened Czechs and the blinkered “petty Czechies” [Čecháčci]’ (Hahnová, 2018: 249). The latter are seen as dragging the nation from its natural moral heights down to irresponsible xenophobic particularism, which is

frequently pictured as a survival of ‘communist mentality’. Were the ‘Czechies’ only represented by a handful of extremists, their sharp criticism would be fully justified. But as soon as they start to cover all of the voters of Miloš Zeman, this amounts to dangerous national exclusivism. As Auer (2004: 127) puts it, ‘the overemphasis on the “highly civilized and democratic Czech tradition” . . . can lead to a “superiority complex” and intolerance of those who are perceived as lacking in these traits’, whether they be the more ‘backward’ Eastern nations or the ‘petty Czechies’. It is little wonder that those who have ended up in the ‘petty Czechies’ group defend themselves by means of the ‘corrupted elite’ myth. Interestingly enough, as part of their defence, they too accuse the pro-Western elites of displaying ‘communist mentality’, pointing out (correctly) the parallel between the present-day progressivist ethos of social improvement and the 1950s exhortations to ‘building a better society’. It is useful to remember that communist nationalism was also predominantly of the universalist political type, which helps us to see the possible risks this type of identity construction involves.

In this regard, the figure of Václav Havel is highly interesting: starting as the philosopher-king with a global moral authority, he ended up as a scapegoat on whose shoulders numerous Czechs tried to lay the burden of their post-revolutionary frustration. Unjust as this undoubtedly is, there does seem to be a deeper logic behind the development. As Auer (2004: 121) points out, the notion of the philosopher-king who transcends political squabbles through his higher wisdom has been rightly criticized by Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin as incompatible with democratic pluralism. ‘When political decisions are motivated purely by moral considerations, however noble these may be, the principles of representative democracy may suffer, since countering arguments of competing interest groups may not get a fair chance for consideration’ (2004: 123). This is indeed one of the main arguments of present-day Czech Havel-haters, who define ‘a Havelist’ as someone who ‘lives in the conviction that only his truth is the real one’ and who ‘does not respect the views of his opponent’ (Velička, 2013). Higher non-political morality thus runs the risk of turning elitist and excluding alternative views from the democratic debate. This is a danger that Havel’s present-day followers should keep in mind.

Conclusion

The purpose of my article has been to shed new light on the current antagonism between the Czech pro-Western liberal democratic discourse and the discourse of national sovereignty by reading it from the perspective of long-term conceptions of Czech national identity and the mythical narratives through which they have been expressed. I have shown that both of these discourses are but variations on two basic mythical conceptions of Czech identity that have been crucial for the Czechs since the 19th century: the particularist conception, which defines the Czech nation through its unique ethnic, cultural and historical heritage, and the universalist conception, which celebrates the nation’s civilizational, moral and spiritual achievements.

We have seen that throughout most periods of Czech history the two conceptions to some extent collaborated, though their exact relationship and proportion varied from case to case. It was only after the Russian invasion in 1968 that the cooperation between the two master myths collapsed, and there emerged in dissident circles an independent universalist pro-Western myth that after the Velvet Revolution became the dominant narrative of the 1990s. Yet, once the post-revolutionary enthusiasm evaporated and the glorious return to West started to seem to many as unreachable, the subsequent disillusion again came to be expressed through the particularist myth of Czech national sovereignty being endangered by irresponsible cosmopolitanism.

One thing my analysis has revealed is that the long-term symbolic structures shaping national identity are far more stable than they might appear at first sight. Their continuity is disguised by the fact that the particular narratives through which they are expressed change constantly and are tied with different ideologies. Yet, this mostly amounts to changes in ‘derivative myths’ only, the narrative templates behind them (the ‘master myths’) remaining the same. Thus, even ideological conceptions which seem directly opposed may actually be shown as variations on one and the same mythical theme (cf. Bouchard, 2017: 35). We have seen, for instance, that the communist synthesis of the universalist and particularist myth followed the pattern previously established by Masaryk and that the present-day pro-European social progressivism shares many features with the pro-Soviet communist progressivism of the 1950s. This insight helps to explain the sometimes surprisingly swift and radical changes of political regimes that the Czechs have gone through in the 20th century, tracing underlying continuities of identity behind them. It also allows us to appreciate why the particularist myth could re-emerge with such strength, dead though it seemed in the 1990s.

At present, there is a cultural war between particularists and universalists going on both in the Czech Republic and elsewhere, which makes the two perspectives seem strictly opposed and irreconcilable. It has been another of my aims to relativize this split. We have seen that throughout several periods of Czech history the two master myths were perfectly capable of cooperating. I have related this to the ambivalent nature of modern nationalism in general, which essentially combines both universalist and particularist features, sometimes foregrounding the former, sometimes the latter. Thus, even most particularist national myths actually contain some universalist elements, showing the unique ethnic group in question as a paragon of democratic and moral values, while most universalist myths present their panhuman values as deeply embedded in specific national traditions (such as the tradition of Czech humanism praised by Masaryk and Havel). This realization might help us overcome the seemingly insurmountable present-day divide between universalism and particularism and search for ways to develop dialogue between them.

One of the biggest obstacles to this dialogue lies in the current polarization of the public debate. By presenting the other myth as dangerous, each side tries to defend its own position as strongly as possible, so that in effect the myths paradoxically reinforce each other. It is this mythical antinomy, rather than either of the myths as such, that is dangerous, driving both myths to extremes. In effect, the particularist myth tends to take an illiberal turn, while the universalists in their self-defence tend to exclude half of the population from the national collective.

Clearly, the ideal solution would be to find a way of reuniting the two myths, that is, of rehabilitating ‘nationalism’, depriving it from its timid parochialism and conceiving of it in a more open-minded manner which sees, for example, a larger European identity as complementing rather than threatening the national one.¹⁵ I am aware, though, that this is a long-term goal which is not easy to achieve. The first step might consist in learning to step back from the myths, see them in their wider context and realize their relativity. Such a critical reflection might allow both sides to ease the pressure on their opponents and reduce the intolerant and black-and-white aspects of their own mythical perspective. The initiative in this mythical self-criticism needs to be taken by the proponents of universalism, that is, by the cultural and intellectual elites, for it is them who are in the more responsible position. Public intellectuals have always played a prominent part in modern mythmaking, and they have it as their task to analyse the state of society in a contextualized and self-reflexive manner.

An important step towards such a critical reflection consists in learning to see the potentially dangerous aspects of each myth, thus realizing its limitations. This is especially important in regard to the universalist myth, which still dominates the Czech public discourse, and which at the same

time thanks to its moral and open-minded ethos masks its dark sides much more skilfully than the particularist myth. While at first sight universalism with its liberal cosmopolitan openness might seem as clearly superior to the petty chauvinism of the particularists, we have seen that universalist political nationalism ‘can be every bit as severe and uncompromising as ethnic nationalisms’ (Smith, 1995: 101). It too follows the logic of excluding the Other, differing just in the criteria on which this Other is defined. In itself, universalist conceptions of identity are thus no less one-sided than the particularist ones. It is only when the universalists admit this that a search for a mythical compromise may begin.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Shields (2012, 2015) for Poland and Toplišek (2019) for a comparison of Poland and Hungary.
2. The former course was appropriate for nations with ‘an already existing, well-defined and codified high culture, which had as it were marked out and linguistically pre-converted its own territory by sustained literary activities ever since the early Renaissance or since the Reformation’ (Gellner, 1983: 100), the latter for nations with ‘a high culture as yet not properly crystallized, a merely aspirant or in-the-making high culture’ (Gellner, 1983: 100), typically existing as a part of large multinational empires.
3. We may further differentiate between basic master myths, which set the principal perspective from which national history and identity is to be understood, and auxiliary master myths, which amount to various particular themes and motifs of which the mythically constructed national identity consists (a distinction implied in Bouchard, 2017: 116). The auxiliary master myths are still general patterns to be refilled with ever new content (e.g. the myth of dark age following national defeat), but they are more narrow in scope, being as if the components of which the basic master myths are made. In what follows, ‘master myths’ without further qualification will mean ‘basic master myths’.
4. I speak of ‘discourses’ instead of ‘master myths’ whenever, I wish to draw attention to the ‘talk and text produced in regard to concrete political issues’ (Kampf, 2015: 3) instead of the deep symbolic structures underlying them. Thus, for example, a ‘nationalist discourse’ refers to the kind of rhetoric used by nationalist politicians, whereas a ‘nationalist master myth’ denotes the long-term symbolic patterns behind such rhetoric.
5. Palacký (1930a: 104): Czech history ‘is in general based mainly on the strife, or mixing and struggling [stýkání a potýkání] of the Slavic and the German element; in other words, on the permanent adopting and rejecting of German manners and orders by the Czechs’. Cf. Rak (1994: 97–109).

6. From the perspective of world-system theory, this surprising symbolic reversal can be explained as a creative (though unsuccessful) attempt of the semiperipheral countries of Eastern Europe to overturn the dominance of the core countries of the West by introducing ‘fundamentally new organizational forms’ (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997: 96).
7. In this regard, it would be more precise to distinguish between two variants of MM2: the pro-Western MM2a and the pro-Eastern MM2b. However, for the purpose of my article such a distinction would be superfluous, for it is only MM2a that exists as an independent master myth opposed to MM1. The pro-Russian myth has always been closely tied with MM1. Moreover, at present – despite the frequent accusations of MM2a adherents – there are very few Czechs who would actually want to incorporate the Czech Republic into Russia’s sphere of influence. Rather, MM2b is typically linked to Putin’s myth of a multipolar world respecting local uniqueness, and it serves to strengthen Czech national identity against the West-dominated cosmopolitanism of MM2a. In this respect, it is closely tied with the auxiliary myth of Bohemia as a bridge between the West and the East (for this myth, cf. Činátl, 2011: 51–52; Holý, 1996: 182–183; Macura, 1993: 8–10, 23–24).
8. This is best apparent in case of the Hussites: ‘due to communist propaganda the majority of Czech society has grown weary of Hussitism and wants to hear no more about it’ (Čornej, 2013: 33).
9. For Patočka, it is really Přemysl Otakar II who deserves the title of the greatest Czech, in that he envisaged Bohemia as an ‘outpost’ of Western expansion in the East (Patočka, 2006: 269–270). This contrasts sharply with the view of Palacký, who saw Přemysl as an illustration of what happens when a Czech king abandons Slavic spiritual peacefulness and attempts to imitate German imperial aggressiveness: ‘from the beginning of his rule Přemysl’s attitudes were such that he seemed to be more of a German than a Slav’ (Palacký, 1930b: 52). Cf. Činátl (2011: 65).
10. Cf. the brilliant mythological analysis of Klaus’s 1990s discourse by Williams (1997).
11. In Bouchard’s terminology, Czech master myths have been retranslated into new derivative myths. The auxiliary master motif of dark age following national defeat, for instance, is no longer expressed through the derivative myth of the 300 years of darkness following the White Mountain defeat but rather through the myths of the 1938 Munich Betrayal followed by the Nazi Protectorate, the 1948 communist coup followed by a 40-year devastation of the country or the 1968 Russian invasion followed by 20 years of moral degeneration. In the auxiliary motif of ‘mixing and struggling’ with other mightier nations, the Germans have been replaced by the Russians, and for some even by the European Union as the ‘New Moscow’ curtailing Czech national sovereignty. Significantly, many of these auxiliary master motifs are shared by both MM1 and MM2, although each basic myth reads them from a different point of view and may translate them in different derivative myths, that is, fill them with different historical contents.
12. The auxiliary myth of renegade elites was already developed by Palacký, in whose narrative it was thanks to the common people that the Czech nation survived the period of darkness; Czech nobility, on the other hand, was germanized, thus betraying the spirit of the nation (Rak, 1994: 67–81).
13. To some extent, this resembles the situation of the post-Munich Second Republic sketched earlier: once the humanistic ideals of First Republic collapsed under the pressure of Hitler’s Germany, all the blame was put on Masaryk’s universalist ethos, and national identity was henceforth only sought in the particularist historical continuity of the ethnic collective.
14. This can be seen from the results of the presidential elections: in both cases, Zeman won by just a narrow margin.
15. For a defence of this kind of open-minded nationalism, see, for example, Brubaker (2004), as well as the March/April 2019 ‘New Nationalism’ issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

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