

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Procedure field

Applicant

**Applicant's home unit,
institution**

Habilitation thesis

Reviewer

**Reviewer's home unit,
institution**

Faculty of Social Studies

Social Policy and Social Work

Mgr. Victoria Shmidt, Ph.D.

Center of Southeastern History and Anthropology,
University of Graz

The Politics of disability in interwar and socialist
Czechoslovakia: Segregating in the name of the nation
doc. Kateřina Lišková, Ph.D.

Faculty of Social Studies,

Masaryk University

When reading this habilitation thesis, I noticed several shortcomings. Firstly, the authorship of the thesis remains unclear. Dr. Shmidt identifies herself as the editor and while she explains the role of one of the authors (Frank Henschel), the role of the other (Karel Pančocha) is not explained. I leave it up to the habilitation committee to decide if this presents an obstacle for a successful defense of this thesis. Secondly, I identified a host of problems. Lack of clear research questions and sociological methodology, together with a weak connection to the existing literature and questionable interpretations, complicate my understanding of this thesis as a piece of scholarly work. These problems are compounded by opaque prose in which this thesis is written. While I took copious notes, I decided to present examples of these serious problems mostly on Chapter 6 "The Forced Sterilization of Roma Women between the 1970s and the 1980s" and the Conclusion. However, these problems are typical of the entire thesis.

Let me start with **language issues**. The reader encounters problems with

- a) English **vocabulary, grammar and syntax**. The author/editor (because of the uncertainty of Dr. Shmidt's role, I will refer to her in this way) uses expressions such as "spontaneous abortions" instead of miscarriages, formulations such as "the absence of marital status and 'illegal' children" instead of illegitimate children, and mixes metaphors, such as in: „The asocial patterns of reproduction resonated in the document with a colorful picture of insufficient parenthood of the third-category families.“ (p. 188) – a picture cannot resonate. Moreover, Czech and Slovak originals mentioned throughout the text are often misspelled.
- b) More serious issues arise when **basic intelligibility** is compromised. Examples abound, let me present a handful:

“It is easy to recognize the motives for labeling the families as asocial as similar to those espoused by national socialist scholars (the absence of marital status and “illegal” children), more typical of the second demographic postwar expectations – the predominance of extended multigenerational families against the desirable nuclear family.” (p. 196)

“The experts who discussed the risks of sterilization for women consistently reproduced the intersectionality between ethnicity, class and gender.“ (p. 186)

„These reports stressed the resistance of Roma women against being sterilized, but also until the end of the 1970s, the issue of sterilization operated as quite open for public concern over social policy targeted at the Roma.“ (p. 193)

„This document informed international organizations; in turn, the Czechoslovak state needed to change its performativity regarding the politics of the Roma – by combining a regime of strict

secrecy and along with it, more sophisticated discursive practices targeted at proving Roma degeneracy.“ (p. 193)

„Hidden sterilization aggravated the coherent administrative order of decision making concerning all related matters, including the allowance for those who decided to be sterilized.“ (p. 193)

„The decision about the eligibility to receive an allowance and the particular amount was made by the administrative order as well – the local Department of Public Health fixed the terms under the recommendation of the social worker from the Board for the Reeducation of the Gypsy Population. The administrative order reduced the necessity to record the consequences of decision-making.“ (p. 194)

„The institutional elusiveness of the administrative order should be compensated by intricate ideology aimed at legitimizing those who participated in the practices led to sterilization and along with it, relieving them of the potential pressure on the part of civil activists. This double-sided task can be easily compared with the massive professionalization and theorization of propaganda messages concerning asocial groups in special education and child psychology in the Third Reich.“ (p. 194)

„During the 1980s, the professional discourse of helping professionals about the Roma, especially Roma women, exaggerated the main frames of public opinion framed by prejudices against this population“ (p. 194)

Overall, the text is written without internal structure. Even at the level of paragraphs, the coherence is missing, and thus the meaning remains unclear. Very often, I struggled to understand what the author/editor tried to say. She uses highly abstract expressions that do not seem to denote anything in social reality – neither the historical one she purportedly analyzes nor the academic one to which she attempts to communicate her research. The first sentence of the Conclusion captures this void of meaning persuasively: „Exploring the politics of disability in twentieth-century Czechoslovakia alludes to the broader circumstances of intersecting discourses around health and ethnicity, and the institutions of public health, education, and social care; it combines political propaganda with science, reproducing the reciprocity of national and international agents creating the politics of health, disease and disability.“ (p. 203)

I opened my review with the linguistic issues only to foreshadow the other problems this thesis posits. Mostly, I remained unpersuaded by the **analytical work**. It is because

- a) **Research questions** (RQs) are not clearly presented, **methodology** in its very basic form (what the researcher did, how and why, guided by which concepts, analyzing what sources) is missing, including **connections to previous scholarship**.

In lieu of RQs, we can read on p. 13: “Our study is anchored by several overarching questions. What became of the disability discourses that ‘lost’ their impact on policymaking? How did actors transform their ideas for making their arguments more suitable to answer the calls by authorities? How did actors interrelate ideas and policies?” And on p. 14: “The main research question underlying the chapters in this volume is: Which combination of driving forces brought the analogy between disability and ethnicity into action within different realms of the politics of public health?” What does the author/editor mean by “lost impact on policy-making”? Who or what lost their impact and when? Who are the actors she mentions? What is meant by “interrelate”? What types of “driving forces” did the author/editor investigate? And crucially, what is meant by “analogy between disability and ethnicity”? I would welcome explicit references to social science scholarship that draws such analogy, and I would like to see the author/editor explicitly engage with these.

In the first sentence of her abstract, the author/editor posits “the politics of disability a pillar of national identity” and repeats this claim throughout the text. While it is an established practice to analyze a minority/deviant/seemingly-irrelevant issue as the reverse of the norm with the explicit aim to expose the norm, I missed references to sociological literature, which provide a conceptual blueprint for such an exercise. When a sociological concept is mentioned in passing, it seems to be employed incorrectly (i.e., the author/editor mentions “social capital” on p. 115, while from the context, I reckon she means symbolic capital).

While disability and ethnicity in socialist Czechoslovakia are surely among less frequented research topics, I miss engagement with the monographs devoted entirely to this topic, namely Celia Donert's 2017 book *The Rights of the Roma. The Struggle for Citizenship in Postwar Czechoslovakia*. Moreover, there are relevant studies focused on 20th century Czech/oslovakia and its intellectual/expert history written mostly by authors affiliated with various historical institutes of the Czech Academy of Sciences or Charles University (Kopeček, Sommer, Holubec, Pullman and others), which might have proven helpful in focusing this thesis. Research on ethnicity in other socialist countries is mentioned only rarely and typically in footnotes. As a result, the contribution of this thesis is difficult to decipher since it does not appear to be in communication with previous scholarship.

Moreover, I am not able to identify the methods used and the way the sources were selected. While most historical sources seem to be published ones, there are also archival (unpublished) sources. Yet, their relevance is not entirely clear to me. How did the author/editor select these sources and what they represent? My confusion is compounded by the way sources are referenced. While this might not have been entirely within the sphere of the author/editor's influence, the typeset of the thesis is such that a source is identified in a footnote as "Okresní péče o mládež v Plzni: Odbor pro ochranu duševně nebo mravně úchylných, 'Dopis krajské.'" which omits the archive, the year and even the relevant actors (in this case: who wrote this letter to the regional what and in reaction to what). I note that this is a rather unusual way of presenting archival sources, which makes ascertaining their relevance and importance nearly impossible. As a result, the facticity of key claims, such as "It is reasonable to view the activities of anthropologists as a well-organized community with a particular agenda, a high level of institutionalization and the ability to affect policy making by producing a complex expert platform." (p. 158), or "Undoubtedly, the idea to introduce sterilization among the Roma started to be discussed by authorities during the debates concerning this document" (p. 189), remains anything but undoubted.

The author/editor often presents statements that would require a reference to secondary literature, such as, "Among other strategic trajectories, Czech eugenicists (including the new generation) started to elaborate the issue of legalizing sterilization. This initiative resonated with the postwar call for professional treatment of the disabled and replacement of family care by special institutions." (p. 180) or "Invoking the ideals of progress and humanism, special education was a source of national pride for the Czechoslovak people and state." (p. 121)

b) Given all of the above, it is hardly surprising that **interpretation** remains unpersuasive. For example, the sentence from p. 121 I just quoted is followed by: „This approach conciliated utilitarian view on humans as the main capital of the nation and sentimental rhetoric around future generations.“ Yet, I missed the examples of a "view on humans as the main capital" and of "sentimental rhetoric around future generations" presented. Plus, it remains unclear how this relates to "special education [as] a source of national pride". A potential connection needs to be spelled out and based on robust evidence.

In the Conclusion to chapter 5, the author/editor writes, somewhat surprisingly: „Academic discourse surrounding the Roma remains to be theorized as a version of the public anxiety toward the Roma, and the options to cope with this anxiety in favor of sustainable recognition of the Roma remain to be addressed. This dual continuity, between the interwar and the socialist periods, as well as between public and academic discourses, equipped the concept of the Roma through extended intersectionality, presenting the Roma as vulnerable and limited in their capacities.“ (p. 174-175). Well, I thought it was the author/editor's job to theorize and explain the relationship of the ethnic majority towards the Roma in Czechoslovakia (what she means by "extended intersectionality" eludes me).

Then, there is work with numbers. On p. 192-193, the author/editor expounds absolute numbers of births and abortions underwent by Roma women in Karlovy Vary (why there?) in years 1976 and 1979 (why these two years?). The author/editor continues by quoting what amounts to one percentage point difference in the share of abortions among Roma. The significance of these numbers remains unclear. Furthermore, on p.197 appears to be confusion regarding percentages and percentage points. „The number of such families

decreased from the first category to the third by 10 percent: while 92.1 percent of first-category families were nuclear, only 70.8 percent of the third category were nuclear.“ (p. 197). I do not quite understand how the author/editor arrived at 10%. The difference is either 21.3 percentage points, or the first category families lived in nuclear formations over 30% (exactly 30.08%) more frequently than third-category families.

Let me close by quoting, rather extensively, from the Conclusion. My aim here is to summarize many a problem with this thesis. Firstly, I do not quite understand the metaphor of Pandora's box chosen to express what I assume is one of the central claims: „It is reasonable to compare the case of institutional violence against the Roma during the postwar period with Pandora's box. Geneticists constructed the institutional framework for making decisions aimed at applying negative eugenics. Aiming to prove the hierarchy of defectivity, anthropologists and special educators filled the construction through relevant clichés for providing the intersectionality of disability, childhood, ethnicity and gender. The experts from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs brought the program into action. This metaphor calls for systematic revision of current practices concerning the attempts to establish redress for Roma women as well as oblige epistemic communities to accept historical responsibility for allowing injustice.“ (p. 201)

The prose, again, obscures meaning: „This intercountry focus reverberates with the very palpable role of global neocolonialism that started to emerge since the mid-1960s as a kind of international setting aimed at disseminating theoretical arguments and practicalities of such extreme forms of transgression as sterilization.“ (p. 202) or on p. 210: „Established during the interwar period and reinforced during the socialist period, the border between a healthy, wealthy Czech majority and a disabled poor Roma minority remains observable but unapproachable for critical revision until it operates as a part of constructing nation authenticity and the hierarchies that is racial in its core – the ability to be assimilated. Decisive for establishing and achieving the realizable goals of desegregation, objective historical possibilities concerning the interrelation between discourses, institutions and actors contest the commodified experience of national pride and revolutionary romanticism that amount to wishful thinking, either on the side of “authentic” national values or within progressive international expectations regarding the elimination of discrimination“ (p. 210). Finally, here are the very last sentences of the thesis: „The genetic narrative moves beyond the distinction between ‘my own time’ and the ‘time of the others’ and practices the temporalization of time itself. It inclines us not to blame history for contemporary limits of desegregation but to practice revision of our own attitudes as directly determined by still not-thought-through seduction by the past. The politics of disability is that ‘other’ memory-bearing unit of Czechoslovak history that creates new, democratic, legitimacy for the Czech state and nation.“

I wish I learned more about ethnicity and disability in 20th century Czechoslovakia. Yet, the problems I described hampered my understanding. I believe these topics, as indeed all our social science inquiries, deserve a much better execution.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

Besides many partial queries asked throughout my review, I am posing the following questions: What are the central sociological concepts used for analysis? What is the main analytical finding? How does the work connect with and enrich existing international scholarship?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “**The Politics of disability in interwar and socialist Czechoslovakia: Segregating in the name of the nation**” by Victoria Shmidt **does not fulfil** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Sociology.

Date: April 17, 2020

Signature:

