

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Applicant

Habilitation thesis

Reviewer

Reviewer's home unit, institution

Faculty of Social Studies

Mgr. et Mgr. Jiří Navrátil, Ph.D.

Contesting post-socialism. Transformation of the Czech economic protest between 1989 and 2021

doc. Mgr. Petr Ocelík, Ph.D.

Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University Brno

The habilitation thesis presents an ambitious project that aims to map and examine inter-organizational patterns of economic protest in Czechia between November 1989 and December 2021. The study applies the Polanyian perspective, assuming a dialectical process, where an expansion of “self-regulating” market forces disintegrates and dislocates social structures, such as family, communities, and local livelihoods, which are crucial for the maintenance of social stability. The disembedding triggers a reactive counter-movement mobilizing against the market expansion and results in a non-linear “double-movement” of the two forces. The research gap to be filled is the examination of particular mechanisms and dynamics through which the “double movement” occurs.

To face this challenge, Navrátil relies upon two main theoretical and conceptual sources, which are social movement theory, represented by key works of Tilly, Tarrow, Della Porta, or Diani, and social network analysis (SNA), providing, besides a toolbox of relational measures, explicit theorizations on the effects of network structures (for instance, Granovetter or Burt). Social movement theory has been one of the fields that pioneered the use of SNA, and it is well-shown that, likewise, the Polanyian perspective is consistent with relational reasoning. Thus, Navrátil convincingly argues that the integration of the three approaches enables him to examine the relationship between the inter-organizational network structures of economic protest and their context, i.e., the character of political structure opportunities and threats. Besides, addressing the question of how network structures, in general, interact with their environment makes the thesis relevant to a broader field of social network research.

Against this background, the “study aims to inspect the role of the changing socio-economic and political context in the structure and dynamics of economic protests” (p. 4).

The theoretical framework of the thesis is presented in the sections 2-4. In section 2, Navrátil introduces the Polanyian perspective and elaborates, while drawing on social movement theory, on what actors are typically engaged in response to social changes, what the expected consequences of the political opportunity structures and threats constellations, and finally, what are the effects of network structures and dynamics of collection action.

Section 3 localizes the research in the post-socialist context while defining its political and economic dimensions, capturing the main political conflict and shape of political opportunities (the former), resp. economic threats and welfare policy ideas (the latter).

In Section 4, Navrátil provides a comprehensive yet concise overview of the developments of social movement networks research, which demonstrates his erudition in the field. He opts for the concept of collective action field (p. 65), a “localized relational arena characterized by mutual orientations, positioning and (at times) joint action among multiple kinds of actors engaged in diverse forms of collective intervention and challenge” (Diani, Mische 2015: 307). Following this reasoning, the study focuses on the examination of patterns of public collective action captured by the co-occurrences at protest events, which are assumed to represent interactions among diverse collective actors and their coordination manifesting the Polanyian counter-movement (p. 66).

The research design is sound, systematic, and carefully built. The research is primarily of an exploratory nature in the sense that the analysis is guided by the conceptual framework of the collective action field, which serves as a heuristic through which the developments of economic protest are captured and interpreted.

Data collection is an impressive effort generating a comprehensive dataset of all protest events on social and economic issues that took place in Czechia between November 1989 and December 2021 and were covered by the Czech News Agency. The coding process follows an open-coding approach suitable for such a purpose. Footnote 12 states that the data collection and coding were a team effort, which also includes inter-coder reliability and validity testing. Although such a description is sufficient in the current format, it should be expanded in case of future journal publications using the dataset; optimally, the whole data collection and processing pipeline should be presented in the form of an Appendix.

The employed methods are presented correctly. First, SNA as a metatheoretical framework is presented. Second, network data organization is introduced. Third, an overview of network methods, including standard descriptive measures and inferential techniques based on randomization tests, is provided. Finally, the case description is thorough, and the periodization is convincingly justified, which provides a solid basis for the contextual interpretation of the results.

I have a couple of suggestions for improvement. For readers not familiar with SNA, it would be beneficial to have a more elaborate description of the concepts and measures. For instance, the idea of structural equivalence and the core-periphery model are presented in two sentences (p. 82) without providing a definition, only stating that it enables “analysis of roles and position in the network”, again without explaining what is meant by roles and positions within this strand of SNA. Moreover, the preceding sentence says that networks can be analyzed by identification of “groupings”; i.e., nodes that are closer to one another than they are to another grouping, which refers to the related but distinct analysis of cohesive subgroups (while not all equivalence classes need to be internally cohesive). I argue that a more thorough introduction of those concepts and measures is important not only in terms of a fuller grasp of operationalization but also in terms of a closer connection of the concepts and measures to theory (e.g., what kind of theoretical expectations the presence/absence of core-periphery structure suggests?). I would also consider analyzing two-mode networks, which would enable to account for the properties of the protest events.

Importantly, my comments are suggestions for future work and do not compromise the presented analysis.

The presentation of the results (sections 6-7) is well-structured, systematically following the research questions (p. 75-76). The impressive scope of the analysis makes some of the sections rather hard to follow and perhaps some of the information could be represented graphically instead of tables (degree distributions or changes over periods). Despite that, Navrátil succeeds in succinctly synthesizing the findings and reconnecting the key findings with a robust theoretical framework.

Although there are a number of valuable findings, for me, the one that indicates that the laissez-faire policies were mostly met with diverging, unsynchronized actors' responses (Polanyian chaos), which were likely dependent on the locally defined mechanisms of collective action, is the most appealing one – since it also suggests a step toward inferential approaches to more fully exploit (1) the longitudinal nature of the data as well as (2) mechanistic reasoning to which Navrátil subscribes, thus allowing him to examine the drivers of tie formation and dissolution and shed more light on the particular combinations of such locally embedded mechanisms that underly collective action.

Overall, this thesis presents a quality scientific work, while making empirical and theoretical contributions. As for the former, the thesis is a rare longitudinal study in the under-research post-socialist region, thus providing novel empirical evidence. As for the latter, the thesis provides insights into the interactions between the inter-organizational network structures of economic protest and their context, i.e., the nature of political structure opportunities and threats.

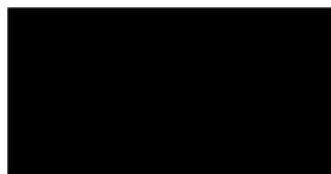
Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

Considering the above, I propose two questions:

- 1) Following my suggestion above, what kind of analytical strategies could be employed to examine drivers of tie-formation and tie-dissolution? What could be a model application of such reasoning considering a particular context (i.e., a specific political opportunity structure-economic threat constellation)?
- 2) Considering your dataset, is it possible to explore the relationship between the (socio)economic protest and some kind of ideological homophily (likely node-level attributes)?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “Contesting post-socialism. Transformation of the Czech economic protest between 1989 and 2021” by Mgr. et Mgr. Jiří Navrátil, Ph.D. **fulfils** the requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Sociology.



Date: 21. 1. 2025

Signature: