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The main topic discussed in the book is technocratic governance in socialist Czechoslovakia from the late 1950s until the fall of the communist regime in 1989. The main author Vítězslav Sommer and his collaborators Jaroslav Mrňka and Matěj Spurný investigate the Czechoslovak road to “technocratic socialism” using several case studies highlighting various areas where the relations between governance and expert knowledge were of crucial importance. The volume focuses on the boom of the technocratic aspect of state socialism during the Prague Spring and its survival and even blossoming in the Normalization era of the 1970s and 1980s. The keywords here are “expert governance”, referring to the importance of scientific knowledge in state management and “technocratic power” as an apolitical rule of experts. As the authors point out, according to the technocratic thinking in state socialist Czechoslovakia, political plurality was replaced by rational expertise.

The techno-optimism of the 1970s and 1980s had the form of a utopian belief in computerization, making central planning much more effective with less bureaucracy. Simultaneously, the pragmatic alliance between the Communist Party elites and the technocratic experts secured the stability of the socialist dictatorships from the 1960s. However, while the late 1960s marked the pinnacle of the expert influence on policy-making, from the 1970s, the experts’ knowledge had to respect the centralist planned economy’s constancy regardless of its growing problems. The Normalization purges also significantly lowered the quality of the expert milieu. In the second half of the 1970s, it became clear that the technocratic governance could not solve the problems of “real socialism”. It was not even able to prevent the politicization of society anymore. With the vision of scientific and technical revolution gone, the regime saw scientific research only as a possible source of Western currency.

The book looks for continuities in discontinuity. From the 1960s, the groups of experts assembled by the government dealt with the socialist well-being problems, addressed the existing economic issues, and tried to make future development predictions. These activities culminated during the Prague Spring. Although the Normalization regime’s representatives strictly rejected most of the 1968 reform proposals, the technocratic tendencies continued to flourish. The authors describe how the new regime utilized reformist expertise for its purposes. One of the most significant examples was the economization of politics. In technocratic governance, the political questions became technicalities, which could be solved by anonymous groups of experts without the tedious popular debates (p. 195).

The case studies in the book illustrate the main arguments and hypotheses on the specific examples. However, the first part of the volume deals with the theoretical background and state management methods in the “era of organized modernity”, which began

at the end of the 19th century. The idea of the socialist technocracy is embedded into the broader context of 20th-century modernity. The first two chapters look at the beginning of technocratic thinking and analyse its continuities, personal as well as ideological, through the existence of interwar Czechoslovakia, the wartime Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and the Third Czechoslovak Republic (1945–1948). The crucial part is devoted to the role of expert knowledge in building a socialist dictatorship. Vítězslav Sommer assembled and analysed a vast collection of publications, both well-known and obscure ones, dealing with the experts' role in society throughout the 20th century.

The chapter about socialist futurology and later prognostics depicts the already mentioned continuities over political changes. The book defines the prognostics of the reform era as the manifestation of the confidence, optimism, and belief in the scientific and technical revolution (p. 82). However, as Sommer shows, it was easy to use the centralized and economized version of prognostics to legitimize the Normalization regime. Subsequently, the stagnation of the 1980s gave many prognosticators a new direction. They became speakers for Perestroika reformism. What is equally significant, the chapter shows that the socialist futurology and prognostics were always aware of the Western trends in this field and were not shy to take inspiration from them.

The chapter by Jaroslav Mrňka deals with management studies and their role in the reformist efforts regarding the ideas of decentralization of the economy and the introduction of “market socialism”. As in other fields of expertise, the Czechoslovak socialist managers widely read Western scholars' works. In the Normalization era, management studies existed in the specific environment of central and “social” planning. The company managers were expected to connect effectivity with solving the employees' social issues, thus taking over the role of the government. In the 1980s, it became clear that such expectations were unrealistic. However, at that time, the managers already had a clear idea about the necessary changes. These were, in fact, very much based on capitalist principles. As a result, as after 1968, most of the managerial elites continued their career even after the regime change brought by the fall of communism.

The next chapter dealing with the modernization in the country investigates the plans to eliminate differences between industrial and agricultural production and generally between cities and villages regarding automatization and modernization. However, as the analysis shows, the price paid for food self-sufficiency and production growth in Czechoslovakia was the ecological destruction of the landscape and negative impacts on the health of the population (p. 137).

Matěj Spurný devoted his chapter to the socialist city planning and urbanization issue on the example of the town of Most and the biggest Czechoslovak block of flats residential area Petržalka, which was a part of Bratislava. The author shows that the technocratic, ruthless approach towards city planning has its roots in the 1960s. The strict dichotomy between the “golden 60s” and the normalized 70s is false in this case. The most disputed projects of the socialist urbanization were planned already in the 1960s, even if the Normalization accent on quantity and cost-efficiency undoubtedly made things even worse (p. 174). The chapter points out the limits of socialist technocracy. The expert knowledge could not get over the lack of resources and general ineffectiveness of the socialist dictatorship and could not change its foundations.

The book concludes with the description of the socialist technocracy's dissolution, which, however, returned in the new era's technocratic populism. The volume answers the question of why the economic and social transformation in Czechoslovakia after 1989 went so smoothly. The market economy agenda was not a previously unknown Western import. Such perception ignores the development before the year 1989. Many socialist experts, especially economists, considered the fall of communism as a chance for the realization of their long-term ideas. As it turned out, many of them were compatible with the "Washington consensus". The Czechoslovak socialist experts had not worked in isolation. On the contrary, they knew about Western development, the exchange of ideas existed, Czechoslovak experts worked in Afrika, and Latin America. The majority of them were far less dogmatic and conservative than the Communist Party leadership. Therefore, the continuity of the expert knowledge is not as surprising as the fact that it was ignored for such a long time.

The volume, in general, represents a well-researched scholarly text. There only a few possibilities for critical remarks. The arguments are based on particular case studies, which have their significance for the given analysis. Still, the authors do not explain why they have chosen those exact topics and not others, similarly important ones like civil engineering, transportation, education, or even sociology (instead of prognostics).

The book would also benefit from the comparison with the development in the neighbouring socialist dictatorships. This would be interesting, especially for the 1970s and 1980s, when the situation in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia was quite different regarding the regime's conservatism or relations to Western countries.

One of the, at least partly, omitted issue is the regime's control over science, or better, over scientific results. Despite their technocratic traits and exaggerated hopes in the research results' economic promise, the socialist dictatorships generally curtailed "inconvenient" research. This dichotomy had to influence the form of the socialist technocracy. Finally, there is one more crucial question: Can we consider the technocracy an inherent aspect of the post-Stalinist socialist dictatorship or was it adopted only as a tool to ensure its effectiveness and survival?

However, these few objections notwithstanding, Sommer's book offers a fascinating, sophisticated, and multifaceted analysis of socialist technocracy and its functioning. The scope and number of primary and secondary sources is admirable. It demonstrates profound research and is ample testimony to the erudition of the authors. The book shows that the technocratic socialism established in Czechoslovakia after the 1970s did not negate the Prague Spring. On the contrary, the Normalization emphasis on expert governance and economic efficiency was a pragmatic continuation of the technocratic tendencies in the 1960s. Looking for continuity in discontinuity helps us to see the socialist dictatorship as a differentiated era and to see its still unknown aspects. What is equally important, by reading this book, it is hard not to think about current developments, and not only in Central Eastern Europe.

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