Hidden in Folklore: The Past and Present of the Revival Movement in Post-Socialist Countries

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The study points to the ambivalence and ambiguity of the folklore movement, which in the environment of the former socialist Czechoslovakia was sometimes associated with the expression "hiding in folklore", describing in particular the act of creating an alternative space to the everyday reality that did not allow a person to fully self-realize or express their own identity. We ask to what extent this metaphor represents the nature of today's folkloric activities in the post-socialist society.
▪ **Keywords**: folklore, revival, post-socialism, memory, Czech Republic

Študija opozarja na ambivalentnost in dvoumnost folklornega gibanja, ki se je v okolju nekdanje socialistične Češkoslovaške včasih povezovalo z izrazom »skrivanje v folklori«. Izraz opisuje zlasti ustvarjanje alternativnega prostora vsakdanji realnosti, ki posamezniku ni omogočala popolne samouresničitve ali izražanja lastne identitete. Sprašuje se, v kolikšni meri ta metafora predstavlja naravo današnjih folklornih dejavnosti v postsocialistični družbi.
▪ **Ključne besede**: folklora, preporod, postsocializem, spomin, Češka

Introduction

The folklore movement in the second half of the 20th century in former Czechoslovakia was, as well as in many other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, connected with totalitarian regimes which used it, to a lesser or greater degree, as its propagandistic instruments (Stavělová, Buckland, 2018). Only recently, after the fall of the so-called Iron Curtain, and with a critical stance, researchers in Bohemia are inquiring to what extent activities of folklore ensembles arising in towns and cities, mainly in the 1950s, actually turned into ideological weapons and to what extent they may have been "islets of freedom" (Vaněk, 2002; Stavělová, 2017; Pavlicová, Uhlíková, 2018) or tools of inner emigration. The research project of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (further as AV ČR) running over several years focused mainly on the study of this ambivalence of the folklore movement and utilised possibilities offered by oral history research. As it can be concluded from interviews with narrators from across Bohemian and Moravian folklore ensembles, the aforementioned phenomenon turned out to be highly ambiguous.[1]

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[1] In the course of three years, approx. 230 interviews were conducted with almost 70 narrators from selected ensembles from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. This was a representative sample from 25 groups existing over several decades which allowed for a view of several generations. The narrators were selected evenly with respect to gender, activity in dance and music part of the ensemble, regular membership or position in the artistic or organisational management of the ensemble.

Their statements confirmed the fact that in the insecure and contradictory times this fellowship became a place where many alternative ideas could be implemented in a creative way (Stavělová et al., 2021). Their narratives often use the metaphor "hiding in folklore", meaning that when people could not implement their ideas within their usual work or spaces, they found another way to render them through music, dance and other activities connected with the folklore movement (organising festivals, shows, competitions). This historical experience was undoubtedly projected into the way through which the folklore movement setting could turn into a communication tool. Moreover, it is obvious that this kind of subliminal talk also generates its other varieties or kinds reaching into the present. However, without understanding the connections to the totalitarian era and to that of normalisation or late socialism, one cannot understand the present form of folklore activities already connected with the era of post-socialism.

Folklore and post-socialism as bricolage

The many discussions and developments of the concept of post-socialism in recent decades (Bryant, Mokrzycki, 1994; Burawoy, Verdery, 1999; Hann, 2002; Bradshaw, Stenning, 2004; Brandstädter, 2007) have brought new perspectives on the trajectory of development in the former Eastern Bloc countries after 1989, and despite the often dismissive attitude towards some theories – or the existence of post-socialism itself in the present day – it appears that this fact cannot be simplified. Some authors argue that the term post-socialist should not be abandoned (Hann, Humphrey, Verdery, 2002: 1–28). In doing so, they point to the fundamental differences of the post-socialist world from the Western capitalist world and to the fact that socialism is imprinted in the minds, traditions and cultures of post-socialist societies, and probably will be for a long time to come. The concept of 'bricolage', which is based on the knowledge that institutional change is influenced not only by the inherited legacies of the past but also by factors, knowledge, and experiences from the current institutional environment for example, is proving to be increasingly relevant. The legacy of socialism is still evident and cannot simply be overlooked, having its roots embedded deep in the period of late socialism (Kopeček, 2019).

Even the sphere of cultural activity under study carries with it a certain heritage, whether consciously or unconsciously, but at the same time it yearns for the realisation of new visions. Here, the boundary between cultural and collective memory is almost invisible; remembering and forgetting is a natural part of the process (Goldfarb, 2019: 55). This often consists of merely glossing over one element and emphasizing another already existing. For example, the now preferred spontaneous entertainment with folklore as an interaction between dancers and musicians is as old as the folklore movement itself – within folklore groups there has always been a certain parallel between what was

Figure 1: Performance of the folklore ensemble Vycpálkovci in 1951. Source: Archives of the Institute of Ethnology of the CAS, Documentation of the Czech Folklore Movement 1950–1970.

for the stage and what remained, so to speak, under the stage.[2] Embodied knowledge or competence acquired through practice in a folklore ensemble can become performance in any number of other contexts. However, this contemporary performance acquires a fundamental meaning and becomes representative of new attitudes and ideas, as sociologist Jeffrey Goldfarb characterizes such collective memory: "There is a need for memory, tempered by imagination. There is a need to not only remember, forget, and re-remember, but also to re-invent, to work to start anew" (Goldfarb, 2019: 63).

Narrator and narratives

In this context one may ask how members of the folklore movement can be viewed generally, and how they can be characterised as members of the contemporary society. It is often difficult to assess to what level they, through the activity in the folklore ensemble, knowingly supported – mainly during Stalinism – the idea of a new socialist society, and to what level it was only a mere temporary post-war euphoria connected with the

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[2] Ensemble celebrations of birthdays, weddings, etc. have always been a welcome opportunity for informal entertainment based on folk music, singing and dancing. This practice is also referred to by some authors as the third existence of folklore, i.e. the process whereby the competence acquired through active participation in a folklore ensemble is usable beyond its normal rehearsals and performances.

belief in a better and fairer world. Attitude towards this activity no doubt changed during the post-Stalinist era, and mainly in the consolidation period after 1968. Were they a "silent majority", people seeking their own identity and their place in society during the years of normalisation? Were these people searching for a chance to escape from the stifling reality or looking for an alternative to the everyday life? What were their political standpoints in the era of late socialism? Were they supporters of the political regime or its opponents? Or were they just "ordinary people"? Was their stance totally passive and they approached their existence as life set on the stage of propaganda which everyone gradually stopped believing in? Did they participate through this in "emptying the regime" as historian Miroslav Vaněk (2009: 13) contemplates?

Narrations, remembering and interviews reveal a wide range of motivations leading to a continuous replenishment of new members arriving, during the whole second half of the 20th century, with various expectations. Some of these expectations prevail; generally we can divide them into a few topics and simply characterise them as *"I enjoyed singing, dancing and playing music", "I wanted to impress girls", "it was fun", "I enjoyed learning something new", "we travelled to perform in Western countries"* or *"I found a good bunch of people there"*. The statement *"the whole of my life is there"* could be heard numerous times, and this gives evidence about an activity that surpasses a usual leisure. This is also supported by those narratives that repeatedly stress an inclination to music, singing, physical activity and theatre. It is obvious that people interested in this domain often felt distinctive enjoyment and need to perform on a stage. This was a very strong motivation which required them to sacrifice a big part of their free time and to be ready to channel it from purposeful engagement into an activity leading to the feeling of satisfaction.

The narrators were very willing to give an interview, and were rather open in their answers. Moreover, they regarded the interviews as a chance to retrospect their long-term activity in the ensemble, including their life stories – but still, their statements have to be approached highly critically. Firstly, one must bear in mind that their statements contain an element of nostalgia, which may transfer the message onto a more or less idealised level. The narrators reminisced their youth, the times when they met their loves and future partners and longed for a life without solitude, and they experienced many events together. They wished to turn everything they verbalised into a pleasant memory because they were involved in the ensemble's activities mainly to gain pleasant experiences. If we were to listen to these "voices of memory", we should admit that they are a dubious and unstable source, changeable in time. A process of recollection plays its role here, giving individual memory an extra element of "permanent movement, dynamics and boost which cause its permanent reorganisation" (Le Goff, 2007: 28–30; Vaněk, Mücke, Pelikánová, 2007: 63).

Ego-documents as well can aptly characterise the time spent in the folklore movement, since they significantly complement similar recollections with a more

contradictory perception of life within the folklore movement (Odvárka, 2008; Kabele, 2014). Found in these is a considerable amount of sarcasm and a critical stance. Such a thoughtful self-reflexion allows to distinguish numerous paradoxes which naturally permeate moments of sheer euphoria and joy of simple being in a folk dance ensemble. It serves as evidence of the environment within folklore ensembles. Irrespective of the era, ensembles had their characteristic attributes without which continuous renewal of the community would not take place. Stress on inclination to music and dance and on performing them was an essential part of every ensemble's existence. It appears across all collected narratives and relates to any period. This magic key to establishing bonds necessary to form a community had to be adopted and mastered by everyone who entered the territory.[3] This document and many narrations about common experiences during ensemble tours, trips, training workshops or celebrations prove that, at the same time, it was supposed to be a thoroughly human matter – or without malicious rivalry. Conflict-free relationships are always stressed, as if nobody wanted to admit that some people, whom memories embellish as "ever cheerful" enthusiasts, could have in fact been, under different circumstances, unscrupulous informants or opportunists. When a community was being formed there was a kind of generally accepted consensus that behaviour like this doesn't belong; nobody searched for information, it was a collective participation on building a picture of paradise. After all, it was a community which did not make one permanently obliged, and its picture lasted as long as it was consciously renewed.

Safe place

Due to the changes in society during the second half of the 20th century, the environment of folklore ensembles with their rather stable membership groups meant for many participants a calming counterweight to the insecure world "outside the ensemble" and, as one of the narrators described it, *"a safe place"*.

> *Well, you can't say it any differently. It'll sound like platitudes but it gave you ... kind of way of life that was fun, or still is. […] Our life was great, wasn't it? We had a blast. And we had loads of friends, it was […] kind of full, all the time we've had lots to do, all the time we were busy and enjoyed it. It fulfilled our life […], it's a kind of hobby, like […] you have some interests, you always meet folks, they age with you and at the same time there are some young ones and their kids, and their kids' kids, and so on. And you can still go to that familiar place, which I think is absolutely*

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[3] Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2006) characterises the community and its various forms.

fantastic when you're old, and that's the biggest trouble – courses for the elderly, I know how it all goes [from professional perspective]*, because the folks they used to know die, and they don't have any more friends and nowhere to go, because they don't have anyone to go with* […] *they're frightened of a strange environment -* […] *This environment* [of the ensemble] *is closely familiar to us, what happens here and how, what I can expect, who I can meet there* […] *you're not shy there, even if you're not really fit* […] *and when your roles change, you feel safe there. I keep saying that a person kind of starts to be insecure in a new environment, insecure in new company and so on. We're still in a safe environment because we know it.*[4]

As the citation from the interview shows, the environment of a folklore ensemble was perceived not only as a safe space where music and dance could be performed, but also as the place where one could establish, often life-long, social bonds. Traditional cultural manifestations as cultural capital[5] of its own kind provided the feeling of security thanks to its invariability and indisputability. Therefore, the background of the ensemble often became a place where one's own identity and inner freedom could be found. The clearly hierarchically divided community did not ask where an individual was coming from, but what benefit they could bring to the whole community. The clearly divided roles – a dancer, a singer, a choreographer, a costumier and others – contoured this social framework acutely and gave its participants the feeling of social and human attachment. Contrary to the other spheres of public life, this kind of identification with the aforementioned environment could not only bring satisfaction from a voluntary choice, but also from a feeling of togetherness supported by music and dance activities requiring solidarity and sharing equal conditions.

These facts cannot be generalised – an individual character of each statement should be taken into account. A summary of such statements helps to define this social setting, the picture of which is created by narratives with all the pitfalls of subsequent interpretation since human memory and its limited abilities, as one has to keep self-reminding, is the main agent in this process. First of all, we must allow for its selectiveness, but also for the fact that narrating represents not only mere memories of narrators, but to a certain level also a consciously presented picture of past events. It is always a reconstruction of the past, its interpretation and evaluation, sometimes with a need to transform it, make it complete or improve it. Another factor that sometimes plays its

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[4] Narrator (1954), producer, dancer, 5. 4. 2019.
[5] In this case we speak of embodied cultural capital – as a long-lasting disposition of body and mind. Equally, it can be perceived as objectivised in the form of goods, i.e. books, collections, and guidebooks, considered as being institutionalised because a certain cultural competence becomes guaranteed through various courses and seminars. For more details see the chapter "The Forms of Capital" (Bourdieu, 1986: 241–258).

role, as the historian Miroslav Vaněk mentions (2009), is a shameful feeling connected with an effort to obfuscate[6] reality. It may arise from some respondents' conviction that participation in the above activities was a way of collaboration with the ruling regime, which may be judged in a negative way in hindsight. The research carried out so far, however, has not confirmed this presumption. Contrary to this, the absence of a shameful feeling points to an apolitical perception of the folklore movement by its members. Partly, it could have also worked as an infrastructure providing a temporary alternative to the contemporary society (Stavělová, 2015: 198–203).

"Until satisfaction lasts"

We still need to inquire how to characterise the meaning of such a community. Also, what actually contributed to establishing and maintaining a community where activities far beyond the scope of everyday life could have taken place? We have mentioned the so-called inner emigration, representing a strategy how not to participate in public matters and hide from social oppression paradoxically into society's own innards.[7] Zygmunt Bauman (2006: 87) develops an idea of the place of safety in an unsecure world as an associated concept. For him, the fact that this should be a "DIY" activity is an essential prerequisite for safety – meaning that this concept should be based on a brotherly unity or communal spirit. In a place where the state has failed, a community will provide the feeling of safety epitomized in "a territory inhabited" by its members, which also means certain separation and isolation.[8] To establish a community, there must be an incentive – a kind of "entry and exit visa". The discourse nature of community lies in the ability to recognize either its ethical or aesthetic nature, but usually both aspects are combined, Bauman states. What constitutes an ethical community is the right to strive for social recognition in fair conditions of equal opportunity; it is woven from long-term commitments and unshakeable duties. This permanency of duties allows the construction of future and elaborate plans with known variables, which creates bonds of "brotherly sharing". All this is done with a vision of guaranteed certainty, security, safety (ibid.: 58–62). An aesthetic community, on the other hand, gives a number of individuals a chance to be temporarily rid of their separately experienced worries and concerns, to which they still return though. Ties which do not bind are made ad hoc, the

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[6] Miroslav Vaněk mentions "a shameful feeling" mainly in connection with narratives concerning the normalisation era, when the narrators were in conflict with the post-November authoritative discourse, and they sometimes tend to obfuscate their statements to avoid negative evaluation due to conformity and participation in the political regime.

[7] The concept of inner emigration is used in connection with inactivity or closure from external pressure. It means building an individual mental space rather than a specific shared environment. This notion was used in a scientific study on German literature of the 1930s and 1940s (see Donahue, Kirchner, 2003).

[8] Compare also with Davidová, 2008: 198–205.

participants do not carry them away as they are only "carnival bonds". When both layers are permeating, an "ethical authority of leaders" as a moral supervision and calming power is amalgamated with the need of permanent ritual renewal of the community, with respect to its transitory and movable nature. In both cases a community survives only until it is beneficial and acceptable (ibid.: 54). Its important role is to guarantee joy from togetherness without inconvenient bonds. However, this togetherness appears to be real. It is experienced to seem real and responsive to the desires of individuals, who do not feel that their freedom is being encroached. The possibility of choice (freedom) is its main weapon and the most sought-after reward; the fight for identity is an ongoing process. This, however, must stay flexible and open to experiments and alterations. The motto "until further notice" is valid here. A chance to leave a community is more important than "realism" of identity being strived for (ibid.: 52).

By all means, the attributes of a community and the relativity of its existence can be transferred to folklore ensembles, where the motto "until satisfaction lasts" goes double (ibid.: 54). The need to practise regularly with the ensemble made the position of its authorities legitimate. The same can be stated about establishing bonds during joint activities, without which such activities could have not been pursued. Commitments to the group of people (a pack) became a permanent duty. In other words, a reliable attitude to getting the performance on the stage, where the absence of any one individual disrupted its realization. For an ensemble to run smoothly, it was essential to respect these rules because all its activities were based on jointly performed work, and so hardly anyone dared to ruin the effort. On the other hand, however, if an individual wished so, it was possible to leave the social environment of the ensemble at any time and without further constraints.

> It shouldn't be idealized too much. The ensemble could be something like a family, but in fact without commitments. Once you were done with it, you couldn't care less about some of the people. In fact, sometimes, it was a real relief. But it was the leaders who were most preoccupied with this…[9]

A continuous process of the preparation and practicing of a repertoire – i.e. sharing jointly experienced "humiliation and suffering" that emerge from any drudgery – was also a continuous means of renewing bonds and the common language. The narratives revealed a strong involvement of members in the creation of the repertoire, and the need to identify with its content. This struggle for identity is related not only to what is perceived as purely male or female expression, but also with the way one experiences their situation in the community. The way a person might impress others and gain

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[9] Narrator (1954), mathematician, IT specialist, manager, dancer, and organisational head of the ensemble, 8. 2. 2019.

acceptance was connected with the willingness to identify with a particular musical or dance element, or with a specific artistic direction. The above frameworks were rarely declined, since the choice of a particular ensemble, as a voluntary activity, corresponds with the acceptance of certain types of roles implicit within the outlined "entry visa". If one made a mistake in their choice they could always leave – freedom of choice is, as posited, a necessary prerequisite to perceiving the environment of the community as safe and free. Simultaneously, it is a prerequisite for its existence which is also full of paradoxes: to enforce safety, freedom must be sacrificed; while freedom can be extended only at the expense of safety. According to Bauman (2006: 20), safety without freedom is tantamount to slavery, while freedom without safety means alienation. Also, in the case of folklore ensembles, making, maintaining, and renewing a community were ongoing processes of negotiation conducted through joint creativity, but also through other experiences connected with such processes.

Although many friendships and regular meetings of former members last, the narrators perceive the existence of the ensemble only in connection with the era they spent as its members. For them, this was the time when it was *"the ensemble at its best"*. Existence of the ensemble community is experienced separately by every member. It does not have a permanent validity for an individual, but lasts only as long as one participates. Therefore, own participation is undoubtedly an essential principle of the existence of a folklore ensemble community.

Invisible violence

The inconsistency and aforementioned ambivalence of the folklore movement cannot be univocally characterised unless one understands the historical connections, perceiving the links between the socio-cultural and political context. While the narratives referring to the Stalinist era and the following years describe often absurd requirements of the new socialist art characterised by naïve and, from today's point of view, amusing ideas of idyllic society, the complex structure of the folklore movement picture connected to the era of normalisation is far more refined. While the narrators briefly commented on the fifties as *"we were young and naïve"*, the times of political consolidation in the 1970s and 1980s are reflected upon in several different layers. On one hand the ensemble is perceived as an apolitical community where members do not "politically screen" each other, but a toll for this "safe place" is paid – i.e. a kind of overseeing "private eye" is present, which can be either scary or a harmless stooge. The figure of a dangerous, but sometimes also a funny political officer underlined the ambiguity of this environment and facilitated the feeling of solidarity and tight unity against "the others". However, no one could be certain that an informer does lurk within their own ranks. Despite all that, the place was considered safe. No doubt such a split of thinking

was in harmony with the way contemporary power permeated society; in other words – how people comprehended ideological mottos and how they understood the political establishment in which they lived, how they defended their interests and how they set up their lives in a world saturated with ideology. It was accepted as normal, as historians Pavel Kolář and Michal Pullman, authors of a study on late socialism, mention (2016: 40): "no political order can stay in power over a long period of time unless it gets at least passive support of the people, and unless it becomes normal for most of them."

What did the word normal mean, then? One should realize that the normalisation language contained numerous proclamations of a peaceful life and honest work, non-violence, calm coexistence. Nobody was to be frightened of condemnation in political processes and other similar repressions. The picture of an enemy changed – the so-called undesired elements (mobs, hippies, and hooligans) became new enemies, a parasitic way of life and antisocial behaviour were considered new criminal activities: "Injustice put on white gloves and moved from legendary torture rooms into offices with padded chairs occupied by anonymous bureaucrats" (Havel, 1999: 935). Violence became invisible, and because a scientific leadership of society was highlighted, it was hidden in a sophisticated system of expert institutions. "Non-political" repression was to secure calmness and safety, protection against "antisocial elements", dissidents were stigmatised. This dichotomy between power and society was accompanied by various survival strategies and practices. Any democratic society would denote them as "silent terror" yet they started to be seen as normal (Pullmann, 2011; Kolář, Pullmann, 2016: 78–88).

Ambiguous speech, which might have even undermined the validity of an official language, was symptomatic for the period of invisible violence. It was used in communities characterised by affinity based on common language, and which could create their own speech. According to theoretician of communication Mikhail Bakhtin (Bachtin, 1980) we can distinguish between two types of discourse. One is authoritative speech, for instance when repeating a text learned by heart; this works like a ritual through which one affirms a given order. The other is convincing speech, which has potential to develop new content and adapt to new conditions. As anthropologist Alexej Jurčak (2018) states, certain empty phrases were repeated so that they could sound as authoritative speech of a higher validity. Due to this, a performative aspect of the language was shifted to the forefront, i.e. its form which gained prevalence over the content of the message. The environment of folklore ensembles gradually mastered this language performativity, owing to the fact that individual actors believed in the convincing power of their own speech. Members had the impression that they were in a free, and therefore safe space. Emptied phrases from the authoritative speech, in the shape of banners and mottos above the stages where the ensembles performed, created a large enough cover for their own intimate speech connected with specific experiences of their performances. Switching between these two realms had become so automated

that even the aforementioned surveillance and censorship were merely components of the necessary authoritative language under which something else could be expressed. This "cover" created a protective shield, allowing members of the groups to feel safe in their community. In the words of historian Přemysl Houda (2019: 116)*, "all such words and acts were deterritorialized parts of the ideological language, which, once separated and reterritorialized, began to carry new, previously unsuspected meanings." These facts confirm the ambivalence of the folklore movement and also partly answer the question how a specific phenomenon can, at a certain point, become a weapon of manipulation and ideology while also providing a safe place where personal strategies can be developed.

In the period of the so-called normalisation, the discrepancy between public proclamations and real life increased. It was usual that things were not told as they were. A kind of metalanguage, endorsing the authoritative discourse, was being created, but at the same time things were happening in a different mode, out of sight, on another level. Such a duality, even a split in thinking, can be easily observed in numerous narratives, from which people's reasoning and acting is obvious. The values of truth and lies gained specific dimensions under the conditions of late socialism. Fear was omnipresent even during late socialism, however it sometimes proved pointless – for instance when children performed at a communist party anniversary, some hitches were brushed aside. This is just another case showing paranoia and the manipulative practices of the ruling regime – respective of its individual occurrence. What a person got away with during one occasion could have serious consequences on another occasion. It always depended on who was present, and how they intended to interpret a particular situation.

> […] *a small boy reached out his hand, saying: "I can see a black beast waiting for his feast." And he was pointing directly at the Communist Party district chairman.* [laughing] *I was really worried because of this. He summoned me to his office about 3 days later and I was thinking: "Oh dear, there will be trouble."* [laughing] *And he says: "It was very nice, this performance, but why were the children wearing such scruffy shoes with holes in their tips?" And I said: "Well, it's because they run all the time and I can't tell their parents to buy the kids new shoes three times a year, because they destroy them instantly." And he said: "Well, so send me an official request and I will give you money for their shoes." And he really did.*[10]

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[10] Narrator (1947), lab worker, dance teacher, dancer, ensemble leader, 14. 4. 2019.

The heritage of the folklore movement at the threshold of the third millennium

The question remains how this experience with the use and manipulation of folklore is reflected as a certain form of cultural heritage in the transformed socio-cultural and political conditions of the third millennium, and what its further changes and practices are. Since the early 1990s, there has been a visible effort to transform this sphere of the country's cultural life in the former Czechoslovakia. The environment of folklore ensembles is being freed from the traces of the so-called state-controlled culture. The era of competitive shows where participants were taught what is and what is not true folklore, and where the so-called purity and authenticity of the scenic form was evaluated, has ended. Discussions ceased about what could still be allowed within the folklore genre and how far the reins of imagination and innovation could be released. Here, too, the need for democratization has penetrated, new types of shows have begun to emerge with the aim of promoting a diversity of creative tendencies in the scenic development of folklore, and other activities have emerged to counter the so-called preservation of folklore (Facebook page of Folklorní mejdlo). The surviving institutions for cultural and educational activities were renamed as organizations supporting amateur creativity, and began to offer workshops, seminars and educational courses for leaders and members of folklore groups. Even within the broad community of folklore ensembles (which has maintained its numbers), the variability and diversity of approaches to folklore themes and their appropriation began to manifest itself, not only in the ensemble's production, but also in their further use in social gatherings. These activities began to gain momentum in the second half of the 1990s and especially in the next millennium. Urban folk groups see their revival as a process of liberalisation, and the importance of participation is emphasised, as opposed to the presentational form of the previous folklore movement (see Turino, 2008). A participatory approach also means the possibility of greater improvisation and the exercise of individual creativity. Events are organised in which it is possible to participate even without significant competence; membership in an ensemble is also not a requirement. This inclusiveness is usually supported by non-violent teaching, e.g., at events such as "dance house"[11] or *folklorní mejdlo*.[12] While the former activities have their antecedents in the Hungarian *Táncház* (Quigley, 2014), the *folklorní mejdlo* (Hrbáčková, 2018; Kolačkovská, 2023) are exclusively a Prague, i.e. urban affair. The important thing is that these activities are no longer perceived by the actors themselves as an "old school" folklore movement, but as something completely different, denying the continuity with a past era with which they do not identify. They want to act differently, they seek to create their own

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[11] There are also many other examples of the existence of dance houses in neighbouring countries (see Pettan, 2010; Kunej, 2023).

[12] The literal translation of this specific term for a party is "folklore soap"; *mejdlo* also means informal party in the jargon of the Czech language.

Figure 2: Dance workshop during the folklore festival Pardubice – Hradec Králové in 2016. Photo: Daniela Stavělová.

relationship to folklore, and in seeking these resources it usually does not matter where the participants are from. It is not unique, therefore, to have a predilection for Moravian or Slovak folklore, e.g., among native Prague residents, etc.[13] These communities refer to themselves as "folklorists". This defines a group of people (a cultural cohort) who like folklore – but what they themselves include under the term "folklore" here is a much more complex question.

When I was writing the introduction to the collective monograph *The Weight and Weightlessness of Folklore*, I was aware of the "dangerousness" of the term folklore, many times bent in various socio-cultural, political, and national contexts, and decided rather to avoid it (Stavělová et al., 2021: 7–11). Unfortunately, however, this did not work with the consistency I imagined, and I had to accept the logic of its use in the context of individual narratives. In writing today, I have already decided to fully accept how the term is used by contemporary actors in diverse folklore activities and to leave it with the meaning they ascribe to what they do. Being a "folklorist" is in fact a process that can only be understood again through the logic of an emic perspective. Today, this includes cliquishness, selectivity and hybridization, eclecticism, and appropriation of elements of different traditional cultures, the search for certainties on the one hand, and the relativization of postmodern or late modern times on the other. The constant

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[13] A student and member of the Prague folklore ensemble Rosénka, which focuses exclusively on the folklore of South Moravia and calls itself Jihomoravská Pražanda (Prague girl from South Moravia), comments succinctly on her Facebook page (Facebook page of Jihomoravská Pražanda).

in this process remains the embodiment and transmission of elements of traditional folk culture of the pre-industrial era, which may be understood as a heritage that can be rethought with the subsequent transformation of this knowledge or cultural memory according to current needs. I see cultural memory here as a process, the starting points being questions of who remembers and with what impact on social relations, as researcher in comparative literature Ann Rigney states in her succinct summary of findings in the field of 'cultural studies':

> Central to this line of inquiry is the understanding that culture and cultural practices are not simply that which merely reflects social attitudes, but are formative in their own right, and need to be understood on their own terms as well as in relation to the actors whose attitudes and emotions they shape. Like two sides to the same sheet of paper, the 'collective' and the 'cultural' perspectives on memory should thus be seen as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive paradigms. (Rigney, 2019: 66)

Why just folklore

The speculation about what makes folklore culture, as cultivated in the field of so-called leisure activities attractive leads to a series of hypotheses and cultural anthropological theories. The question still remains as to why the environment of folk ensembles and their activities could have become that trustworthy place allowing a sense of security and the space for alternative thoughts, and what role folklore played in this. Even the fact of portraying elements of traditional music and dance culture in the form of stage compositions represents a certain peculiarity in modern society. What was considered off-putting traditionalism for someone could, on the other hand, gain the attribute of an exotic landscape or romantic visions of a long-lost paradise for another. And perhaps this last aspect may be the main attraction, but not in the same way for everyone. While in the city, folklore could become synonymous with the distant past, for members of many rural ensembles, it was (and in some regions still is) a close experience preserved within the family. Emotional attachment to the transmitted experience through the family background and local community could stand in contrast to the romantic nostalgia of the globalized urban labyrinth. While nostalgia often tends to be associated with romantic nationalism fuelled by the idea of a disappearing world and its native idyll, the handed-down experience is still an existing reality. As sociologist Svetlana Boym (2001: 10) states, nostalgia does not stem from one's own lived presence, but from the lived presence of others. The native is not nostalgic, but contrary to that, it is a stranger who becomes a mediator between the local and the global. Nostalgia is an irreplaceable and non-elective time, and what matters is the difference from the

current state. The object of romantic nostalgia is beyond the current space, usually in the past or somewhere where time has come to a standstill. However, nostalgia does not represent opposition to progress – it does not only aim backward, it goes sideways and rather seduces than overcomes. It is always shared; it does not divide, but rather unites (ibid.: 11).

Nostalgia as a part of romantic nationalism is a significant element that helps create national identity, and this historical experience is undoubtedly preserved in collective memory. For the folklore movement, it is characteristic that this manipulation was carried out in both directions, which means that folk culture and its means also became a tool for individuals to experience moments of weightlessness, belonging, happiness, or dreamlike idylls. The emblematic nature that folk music and dance acquired especially in the second half of the 20th century can thus become a means of creating a sort of sacred bubble that can only be entered after "properly cleansing one's hands and feet". Folk culture is attributed with many other meanings beyond those implicitly given to it. Rural folklore traditions are often associated with patriotism, with images of the so-called pure, primal soul of the nation. Collective memory is then a strong link between the past and present, with the most important moment for its preservation being the synchronization of the phenomenon with the present. The elements of traditional folk culture in modern society can also act as a hyperbole of everyday life. Wearing a "folk costume" allows, similarly to a mask, switching to a world of different and socially excluded values. They belong to the past and thus create a kind of fairy-tale landscape of paradise lost. As the medievalist Jacques Le Goff (1998: 38) writes, characterizing his concept of the long Middle Ages, "it is that world we have lost, even though we are still linked to it by a nostalgic memory of our grandparents' time. It is the Middle Ages which we are still connected with, by an uninterrupted tradition of oral rendering."

Maybe this is why members of folk dance ensembles are willing to wear tight-fitting, uncomfortable traditional costumes to be drenched in sweat and chafing in tight bodices during lively dances. This is related to the hyperbolisation of folklore in modern society, which has given rise to a sort of para-language – something that is not real, but is perceived as such in these intentions. This search for authenticity took place within the folklore movement from the late 1960s and lasted for two decades. It was originally intended to simplify the scenic stylization of folklore, but it eventually took a direction where the language of traditional folk culture became a carrier of current feelings and experiences. It turned into a developed scenic genre that still features not only its specific movement vocabulary, but also a characteristic type of performativity. This lies in the selection and further processing of themes that express universal human experiences, often with the use of a unique perspective through the lens of traditional folk culture values. It is as if the transmitted experience passed on by collective memory continues to have an effect, connecting the past with the present and contributing to the creation of something new. This is confirmed by its enduring strong link to the present,

as collective memory is also socially conditioned and only what has a relationship to the present enters into the process of remembering (Halbwachs, 1992: 52). Similar speech can also be perceived as a certain alibi to escape participating in current societal issues, or as a way to communicate something urgent through "outdated" historical images. It depends on how this "harmless past" is perceived and interpreted by the recipients of the message.

This traditional and latent experience has become a sort of cultural capital, owned by society, or more precisely, by the part of society that has acquired the right ("entry visa") to use it (Bourdieu, 1986: 241–258, 1993). Such right cannot be easily obtained and requires hours of regular training or other practices related to folk music and dance expression. The aforementioned effort is then rewarded with the right to present oneself as part of a unique imaginative world. Although everyone has to wait for this moment for a certain period of time, on the other hand almost everyone is given the chance: no special skills are required, just average singing, playing, and dancing abilities. This is one of the key features of traditional folk culture, which has never been a selective environment. Its purpose has been to integrate as many individuals as possible into the shared living space. At local dance parties, people not only met each other but also negotiated their individual and social relationships.

This cultural capital and its habits are easily transferable and shared within a community. No one is its owner, and anyone who masters its language can become a participant in the communication. Moreover, traditional folk culture contains so-called carnivalesque elements, which, according to British historian Edward Muir (2005), have their own ritual language that enables the creation of a "liminal" time and space for alternative ideas, and the reversal of the common values of everyday life (Bachtin, 1980, 2007). The ritual language and its knowledge thus offer the possibility to utilize participatory and presentational elements and initiate a social conversation that can take place even in a wider public space. The polysemy of such a language (see also Golež Kaučič, 2021) contributes to the creation of the dichotomy of folklore versus society and supports the idea of the ambivalence of the folk movement in the second half of the 20th century in the Czech lands. The weight and weightlessness of folklore are continuously balanced in this process, offering space for various interpretations of human behaviour.

The publication, whose title *The Weight and Weightlessness of Folklore* captures the ambivalence of the socialist folklore movement, worked with this fact. The weight of the excessive conjuncture of folklore groups in the 1950s (Mináč, 1958) was depicted in contrast to the weightlessness perceived as a paraphrase of the title and content of the novel by the Czech writer Ludvík Kundera (2006), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Weightlessness is here associated with the possibility of escaping from reality into a state that is a mere appearance or illusion of total escape. Like Kundera's un-bearable lightness of being, the weightlessness of the folk movement is conceived as

Figure 3: Visual representation of the actors of the Folklorní mejdlo. Photo: Eliáš Slunečko, 2020.

an idyll in a certain ambiguity or polysemy. Kundera presents it as "happiness wrapped in sadness", when even "lightness becomes unbearable" and merges with the image of the contradictory and emotional split of the so-called normalisation. The question arises whether a similar weightlessness is symptomatic of the activities of today's "folklorists" and in contrast to what. Is this milieu of enthusiastic folklore lovers, the "happy ghetto" that musician and sociologist Trever Hagen (2019) writes about? That is, a place where the practice of music and dance helps build resistance to difficult times and contributes to the formation of a common identity through shared emotions? Or is it merely a liminality needed as a counterbalance to the everyday structure? But why is it that folklore, when there is a wide range of contemporary music and dance practices to choose from, again becomes the vehicle for creating space for alternative ideas?

Folklore does not belong in a showcase!

Semi-structured interviews conducted on the topic of folklorists and folklore reveal a number of facts providing answers to the question of the meaning of folklore activities today: folklore's loss of emblematic quality, the desire to be oneself, folklore as a counterbalance to modernity with its frequent concept of home, the search for a deeper meaning of folklore in connection with nature or cosmology, the emphasis on

the natural emotionality of folklore and its interconnection with one's own life stories, the experience of participation and the associated flow, the appropriation of any tradition and the possibility of identifying with it, and finally the conviction that "folklore definitely does not belong in a showcase, folklore is cool after all..."

In interviews with today's "folklorists", the possibility of freely developing a multifaceted tradition and creating one's own concepts of identification with this culture, with the possibility of having multiple identities, is emphasized; as an interview with a musician, educator and leader of a children's folklore ensemble summarizes exemplarily:

> [...] *As well as my siblings, I've been involved in music since I was very young, and we were involved in folklore within the folklore group, which is to some extent the basis of why one likes these community events and why one likes to be with a group and why one likes to go on these tours and getting to know the way... just the colours of folklore in Slovakia, in Moravia, wherever, in Romania. And I was drawn to it. My mom encouraged us and still does, she's a costume maker.*
>
> [...] *I kept telling myself that maybe I belonged in the village, and that I would either like to have some deeper relationship with a village or somewhere, just to be in the countryside more often. And when I was fifteen, I got to know the area of Moravian Kopanice, so actually the Moravian-Slovak border around Starý Hrozenkov, thanks to our mother. And it was love at first sight, at first feeling. And from the age of fifteen we went there and bought a cottage. And it's my second home, it's on my ID card.*[14]

The informant emphasizes the connection between practicing folklore and her own stories with real emotions, such as her own wedding, or wearing parts of traditional folk clothing in everyday life:

> [...] *I even used the costume at my own wedding. I did have different people make me a wedding outfit that was more inspired by the costume, but I wore it at my own wedding and had it made.*
>
> [...] *For example, I'll wear a black pleated skirt and I'll wear a velvet corded "lajblík"* [The upper part of a woman's traditional folk dress, a type of vest in dialect] *from Rejdová* [...] *Or I wear "jupka" a lot, I even used to have winter "jupka" and "kabátek"* [small jacket in Moravian dialect] *that I wore instead of a jacket. And it's just really important what you have and what is the narrow specifics in that village, that if you take*

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[14] Narrator (1988), musician, teacher, leader of children's folklore ensemble, 9. 5. 2022.

something, for example, from Horňácko, from southeastern Moravia, where there are still some relatively established rules about how the costume should look and what belongs to it, you don't wear everything with such a light heart, for example, with jeans.[15]

In an interview for Czech Radio, Anežka Konečná, one of the founders of "folklorní mejdlo" in Prague, clearly states:

One must be a tramp or a folklorist today to be complete. Through song and dance, friendships are formed for life. Collective singing used to be common, but lately more and more people are looking for and finding something in folklore that they miss in their lives. (Klusáková, 2018)

Yet folklore is also often perceived as a natural part of life, especially in places where spontaneous transmission from generation to generation is still possible, as can be seen in an interview for the magazine *Respekt* with Vlastimil Ondra, a primary school teacher and leader of a children's folklore group in a village in Moravia:

Yesterday, I was on a school trip with my first graders and my second graders to the dino-park. On the bus, I took out my accordion and we sang the whole, more than an hour-long journey there. On the way back. And you think it was just the kids in the band singing? No, not just these. All of them, enthusiastically, and they knew the songs, like, of course. If it was possible, there wouldn't even be ensembles for me. On the contrary, I think they're pretty much a rarity in 2009.

Interviewer: Are the songs written down in a songbook, or are they passed down by oral tradition? Do you know them from your grandparents?

Vlastimil Ondra: We use all the possibilities you listed. We use all of them in different ways in different situations. I don't think I'm reviving anything. It lives through me, among other things. (Respekt, 2009)

We cannot exclude the similarity of today's folklore activities with the search for authenticity taking place in Slovakia as a movement for authentic folklore (Feinberg, 2018; Hrabovská, 2023), although these are two different cultural and historical processes. While the movement for authentic folklore in Slovakia stems from the need to contradict the previous high stylization of the production of folk dance ensembles, and instead create a more natural form of spontaneous performance of music and dance on stage, the form of today's folk dance activities in the Czech Republic is shaped by

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[15] Narrator (1988), musician, teacher, leader of children's folklore ensemble, 9. 5. 2022.

the need for community gatherings and the realization of individual imagination. In general, however, both the Slovak movement and Czech folklore activities can be seen as a kind of search for the authenticity of folklore in contrast to an inauthentic present, while folklorism, as Joe Feinberg (2018: 31) writes, mediates the experience of folklore in the context of modern times. From the perspective of philosophy and sociology, Feinberg then seeks to relate this process to the discourse of liberalism which sheds light on a number of tensions.

However, the emphasis on the immediacy and inclusiveness of folkloric encounters – the search for the certainties of proven traditions interfering with lifestyle – also draws attention to the features of hipsterism embedded in other social classes. It has been characterized as an example of postmodern subcultural identity or the characteristic identity of Bauman liquid modernity (Plesník et al., 2008; Malíčková, 2019). The 'folklorists' show signs of subculture as a process of self-awareness and self-definition, where elements of spontaneity and unconsciousness play a significant role. On the other hand, though, its style is a statement, a system of signs and expressive qualities that are transposed into subcultural expression, i.e. "a set of typical expressive aspects by which a person (group) reveals its own identity and understanding of reality" (Plesník et al., 2008: 45). Subcultural semanticisation here takes place by distinguishing between the "authentic" and the "stylised", i.e. sincerity, authenticity, and the individual as the highest value of the authentic (spontaneous) (Plesník et al., 2008; Hebdige, 2012). Contemporary "folklorists" are particularly associated with hipsterism by understanding tradition as a guarantee of authenticity, reinterpreting images of cultural memory in contemporary aesthetic and artistic reflection, linking subcultural identity with lifestyle and mainstream fashion trends, highlighting signs that are given symbolic potential as a sign of a distinct identity (see Daniel, Řídký, 2017; Malíčková, 2019: 51).

By way of conclusion

What we are witnessing here is the return of some traditional values and ways of thinking: the predilection for association, volunteering, moral outrage, the importance of love, which, as the French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky (2013: 8) writes, is the result of the hypermodernity that is taking place before our eyes. According to him we are in a phase after the second cultural revolution, where these phenomena not only continue to persist, but even deepen when necessary, adding a dimension of humanity to individualism. Traditional folk culture thus regains, not only in urban environments, its specific meaning and becomes a representation of different attitudes; of the intrinsic need of the actors of folk activities themselves to belong somewhere, to identify with an ideological environment and to face new life uncertainties within the security provided by the community. This current wave of folkloric enthusiasm will have to be

Figure 4: Sales stand with clothing with folklore elements at the International Folklore Festival Strážnice in 2019. Photo: Daniela Stavělová.

seen from this perspective, and what the age of late modernity brings will have to be discerned here. As in the folklore movement of the last century, the metaphor of hiding in folklore does not seem to lose its appeal even if it does not manifest in the vocabulary of today's generation of so-called folklorists. It remains evident that even today, this environment is perceived as a counterbalance to the contemporary world, especially in the context of manifesting alternative attitudes or searching for one's own identity and stronger social ties that are not offered by the conventional forms of life. A focus is well deserved on the identification of phenomena where there is a "recycling" and transformation of interrelationships and contexts related to the creation of resilience, and the ability to face the complexities of the times.

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Skrito v folklori: preteklost in sedanjost preporodnega gibanja v postsocialističnih državah

Namen študije je opozoriti na ambivalentnost in dvoumnost folklornega gibanja, ki se je v obdobju nekdanje socialistične Češkoslovaške včasih povezovalo z izrazom »skrivati se v folklori«. Izraz je opisoval ustvarjanje alternativnega prostora vsakdanji realnosti, ki človeku ni omogočala, da bi se v celoti samouresničil ali izrazil svojo identiteto. V drugi polovici 20. stoletja je šlo predvsem za ustvarjanje prostora, v katerem bi se lahko uresničili lastni načrti ali družbene vezi, ki niso ustrezale takratnim političnim idejam. Čeprav je bilo folklorno gibanje od začetka 50. let prejšnjega stoletja instrument kulturne politike totalitarnega režima in je postalo predstava lepše prihodnosti, je kmalu razvilo svoj jezik, ki je omogočal dvojno branje ali sublimno dojemanje tega, kar se je dogajalo v tej dejavnosti. Folklorne skupine in njihove dejavnosti so tako postale okolje, v katerem sta polisemičnost jezika in njegova performativnost omogočili t. i. deteritorializacijo pomenov, tj. nekaj reči ali narediti in nekaj drugega misliti. To dejstvo je bilo podrobno preučeno v okviru triletnega raziskovalnega projekta *Teža in breztežnost folklore*, s podnaslovom *Folklorna gibanja v čeških deželah v drugi polovici 20. stoletja,* katerega spoznanja so leta 2021 izšla v istoimenski kolektivni monografiji.

Analiza pripovedi, posnetih s skoraj 300 pripovedovalci, je prinesla presenetljive ugotovitve, ki kažejo na zmožnost uporabe poznavanja folklore za uprizarjanje samega sebe. Trenutno raziskujemo pomen današnjih folklornih dejavnosti, ki v sodobni postsocialistični družbi uspevajo z neznansko hitrostjo, in se sprašujemo, kako se izkušnja performativnega jezika folklornega gibanja socialistične preteklosti zrcali v današnjih premislekih o ljudskem izročilu v

pretežno urbani družbi in kakšna je dediščina tega gibanja. Sprašujemo se, ali je pojem »skrivanja v folklori« smiseln v današnji svobodni družbi, ki ponuja številne možnosti za samouresničitev. Preučujemo sodobne manifestacije ljudi, ki se označujejo za »folkloriste«, in opozarjamo, da se pojavljajo realnosti, ki posameznike ponovno silijo v iskanje svoje identitete hkrati z iskanjem varnega prostora, kakor Zygmunt Bauman označuje različne oblike skupnosti. Opazujemo nove oblike folklornih dejavnosti, ki so za razloček od druge polovice 20. stoletja vse bolj participativne narave in se zato oblikovno in vsebinsko spreminjajo. Participativnost daje prednost preprostejšim elementom z možnostjo hitrega vključevanja širšega kroga zainteresiranih, tj. ljubiteljev folklore, in poudarja predvsem čustveni vidik pred bolj formalnimi predstavitvami ansamblov. Zanima nas, kateri elementi folklore in njene etnične označenosti so povezani z določenimi stališči njenih današnjih izvajalcev in kako se ti dojemajo kot del nekakšne kulturne skupine. Pokazalo se je, da »skritost v folklori« do danes ni izgubila svojega pomena, čeprav se ne pojavlja v besednjaku današnje generacije t. i. folkloristov, vendar je še vedno očitno, da je to okolje še danes dojeto kot protiutež sodobnemu svetu, zlasti v kontekstu izražanja alternativnih stališč ali iskanja lastne identitete in močnejših socialnih vezi, ki jih konvencionalne oblike življenja ne ponujajo.