

# Linguists in Society: Notes on the Emergence of the Prague Circle \*

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In May 1911, Albert Einstein, after arriving in Prague, where he received appointment to the Physics department of the Prague German University, wrote to Zurich to his friend Besso : "Prague is wonderful, so beautiful, that it alone would be worth a journey" (Speziali 1972:20). Indeed he was in good company in Prague, teaching at a venerable institution and welcomed by the German speaking intellectuals. Historians have noted with interest that he was a frequent guest in a circle at the Fantás, owners of the Unicorn pharmacy in Old Town Square, where Christian von Ehrenfels, Felix Weltsch, Max Brod and occasionally, Franz Kafka used to meet. Max Brod even made a literary character of him : the astronomer Johannes Kepler in Brod's *Redemption of Tycho de Brahe*, a novel set in Prague around 1600, is generally believed to be inspired by Einstein's personality. But beautiful as the ambience was, Einstein also described Prague as "Gedankenode ohne Glauben" (An intellectual desert beyond belief). He left the city with its quaint Unicorn after three academic terms.

Had such linguists as Ferdinand de Saussure, Antoine Meillet or Baudouin de Courtenay come to Prague in the same years as Einstein, they might also have left quickly- the provincialism of the city was too obvious. But when another foreign scholar, Roman Jakobson was fleeing Czechoslovakia on the eve of the Second World War, he said to his friend Jaroslav Seifert, the Czech avant-garde poet and future Nobel Prize laureate : " I was glad to be in this country and I was happy here too"(Seifert 1981:323). And shortly after this an emigre in New York, he returned to his traumatic farewell with Seifert. Addressing an audience of New York Czechs worried about the fate of their occupied country, he said in an unpublished lecture on the Czech author Egon Hostovsky : " I do not think that there is any doubt about the nature of the intellectual legacy with which the Czechoslovak resistance has to identify itself today and tomorrow. Above all, it is the legacy of the avant-garde more precisely the revolutionary, cultural development of the first twenty years of the Czechoslovak Republic. Saying farewell to me in the Prague of April 1939, a great Czech poet put it very well: "There is only one thing you must not forget-These twenty years were immensely beautiful. Remind everyone of how much work we managed to do".

This radical change in judgement the shift from Einstein's "Gedankenode ohne Glauben" to Jakobson's "revolutionary cultural development," owes much to a di-

that Vilem Mathesius a far-sighted Czech linguist, gave on March 13, 1925. Reminiscing about this evening he wrote :

The lack of lively scholarly contact with the Prague philological community which used to depress me, was now felt very intensely by Jakobson who came to Prague from quite different circumstances. We often used to talk about the need for a debate and study center for young linguists and it was quite natural that we looked for a remedy among ourselves. I have noted that on March 13, 1925, I invited Jakobson and Trnka and also Karcevskylateralec-turer in Russian at the University of Geneva but then a master of the Russian gymnasium in Prague. (Mathesius 1936 : 138)

It is hard to imagine a company more diverse than these four persons: Vilem Mathesius (1882-1945), a professor of English and a dry, somewhat moralistically inclined protestant; Bohumil Trnka (1895-1984), his desciple and devoted assistant; Sergei Karcevs-ky (1884-1955), formerly a student of Saussure and Bally, now an emigre activist who first escaped the Czar after the Revolution of 1905 and then the Bolsheviks after yet anotherrevolution; and finally Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), between 1914-1920 an active participant in the interlocking circles of the Russian avant-garde and the Russian Formalists, now an employee of the Soviet Red Cross mission in Prague-hence somewhat suspicious. Nor is it easy to visualize their conversations: Matheisus' Russian was rudimentary, Trnka's probably non-existent; Jakobson knew some Czech, Karcevs-ky probably less. Mathesius was seriously handicapped by poor vision (Trnka was assigned to read for him). Jakobson was a close friend of modernist Russian and Czech poets and artists, far from an academic in appearance. Nonétheless, all these men had one radical commitment in common: modern linguistics andliterary theory. The evening was the first recorded meeting of a group which later became known worldwide as the Prague Linguistic Circle.

The two main protagonists, Mathesius and Jakobson, had met in 1920, shortly after Jakobson came to Prague. In a sense the encounter was not accidental, given their common interests. Yet at the same time their encounter was a pure coincidence. Mathesius could certainly not foresee that the Russian intellectuals who were flocking to Prague as a result of the events of 1917 would eventually help solve his great social and scholarly problem, i.e., creating in Prague a vibrant academic community. Mathesius' determination to raise Prague from its provincial state was beginning to take shape long before the First World War, although under conditions which might not inspire much optimism. Mathesius himslef was a linguist who was educated in an era in which historicism was losing its appeal as anexplanatorymodel. German scholarship ceased to be the point of orientation for many Czechs : English and French writings began to exercise more influence. But for all his determination, he

was restricted by a climate of provincialism. He taught in a city which despite its splendid political and cultural history had considerably deteriorated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Paradoxically, changes which were hailed as great emancipatory achievements often only sustained provincialism. Thus the division of the Prague Charles University into a German and Czech section in 1882 petrified the rift between the intellectual community of this bi-nationality: the Czechs would now only rarely study with German professors, and German students would not even think of the Czech half of the university as an intellectual center.

In 1918, old Austria broke apart and an array of new states arose within its former borders. Czechoslovakia was among the winners. The new state was able to assert its borders easily, suffered no major economical problems, and, most importantly, was sustained by an atmosphere of enthusiasm and optimism. An organizer of Czech scholarship might-it was hoped -quickly transform the momentum into splendid results. Mathesius was one such organizer, and he was the great opportunity which had now arisen. Ironically he could not at first achieve much. The mechanism of intellectual provincialization repeated itself. The Czechs now had their independence, yet political independence and intellectual productivity often do not run on the same fuel.

Other segments of the Czech intelligentsia were facing the same problem after 1918, but were more successful in dealing with it. An instructive solution was provided by the young artists and poets of the Czech avant-garde. They fully accepted the ideology of modernism and quickly jumped on the "international bandwagon." In 1922 a collection entitled *Life (Zivot)* was edited by Jaromir Krejcar, an avant-garde architect who later belonged to Roman Jakobson's circle of friends. *Life* opened with a poem by Jaroslav Seifert and included texts by other Czech poets and intellectuals. At the same time, a number of European artists contributed to it, including Le Corbusier, Ilya Erenburg, Adolf Behne, and many others, their articles were interspersed with pictures of ocean-liners, airplanes and also of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Mary Pickford and other heroes of the Golden Twenties. The international orientation extended beyond finetypographs; Krejcar and other Czech avant-garde architects succeeded in sprucing up Prague's suburbs with constructivist villas in the early 1920s, well before the new government managed to erect its banks, libraries and theaters. The avant-garde thus did not discuss the status of the province and the fatherland very much but acted in consonance with its own cosmopolitan ideology. There were no borders between Prague, Paris, Holland...

Czech scholars, by contrast, seemed at first to be preoccupied with odd questions. In *New Athenaeum* a journal coedited by Mathesius, many pages were devoted to

discussions of whether they should publish in Czech or in German. Mathesius was soon forced to conclude that the circumstances in the new state were even more provincial than in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Moreover, there was no simple formula which would enable scholars to transcend these provincial limits. The Czechs differed in this respect from the German Prague intelligentsia which had the option of leaving Prague and which had in fact cultivated this option to the point of a mania. Prague seemed like a nice provincial theater, capable of accommodating a whole array of personalities ranging from Gustav Mahler to Albert Einstein, but the idea of leaving was always implied. Thus while for German speaking scholars and artists Prague cultural institutions were transient places in a career whose ideal culmination points were Vienna or Berlin, the Czechs were in a different situation since they generally did not look at the place in terms of leaving it behind. But what was to be done to make the capital of the new republic a center of scholarship, how was Mathesius' problem to be solved?

Undoubtedly, Mathesius himself had some of the trumps. He believed in rationally organized work; in the possibility of a universal education proceeding not only by means of a more effective and truly democratic school system, but also through the involvement of intellectuals in public affairs. In his view intellectuals had a strong moral obligation to society. This was what he called "constructive work," a notion which for him stood in opposition to romanticism. His collection of essays *Cultural Activism* (Mathesius 1925) is the most explicit source of his personal philosophy, but his ideas can also be conveniently illustrated by small journalistic pieces such as his brief reflection on the 28th October (the Czechoslovak Independence Day), which he published in the cultural weekly *Přítomnost* (Present Times) in early November, 1926. He noted that the anniversary celebrations were ultimately wasted on petty political campaigning. In this way, "a major psychological mistake" was being committed: "We are not using this exceptional occasion to educate our citizens and to reinforce all their creative efforts. For Mathesius, a clear alternative was available, namely, to "convert (Independence Day) to Constructin Day, a day on which a working program for the coming year would be announced and explicated in detail" (Mathesius 1926;673). The program in question was not to consist of bombastic enterprises. Instead concrete projects were to be pursued leading to results which could be seen and evaluated. Improvements in the organization of public transport would be one such task for instance; another might be the improvement of tourist facilities; and soon this new conception of Independence Day would have immense consequences for the self-education and selfawareness of the new Czech society:

We shall learn to think in concrete and practical terms and gain confidence in our initiative. Moreover, we shall learn not to leave things half done simply because the new Independence Day will be back in just a year bringing the need to check what has been accomplished, what remains to be done and who is guilty that not everything has been done. Such an Independence Day will teach us to work constructively, and work constructively we must, unless we want to decay. (ibid.)

Yet despite all these calls for restructuring the new Czech society, the progress in scholarship was slow. In short in the early 1920s Prague was a city of artists and poets, but was still far from being a center of academic innovation. As often happens however a coincidence in development was not long in coming the years after the First World War introduced a new social and ethnic element to Czechoslovakia, the emigres from the Soviet Union. For the first time in its history Prague (and Czechoslovakia) turned into a major concentration of East European emigres. This development had very specific characteristics. Berlin was briefly (in the early twenties) the capital of Russian culture abroad; Paris was to become a huge center for Russians and Ukrainians in the twenties and thirties, but neither city offered the infrastructure of government-sponsored institutions and grants for individual academic and literary figures. The newly created Republic of Czechoslovakia quickly declared it a matter of principle to make the existence of free Russian and Ukrainian culture and scholarship outside the Soviet Union possible. While the personal initiative the first Czechoslovak President, Tomas G. Masaryk, was strong and conspicuous, it must be noted that the "eastern" emigres received sympathy and support from politicians of varying persuasions.

Little is known today in detail about the coexistence of all these groups in multinational Prague. Leaving aside such good-will actions as folkloristic "cultural days" appealing to the wide public, scholarly societies alone seemed to provide grounds for genuine intellectual encounter between the emigres and the locals. Among them the Prague Linguistic Circle, the solution to Mathesius' problem, clearly stands out for the degree of integration achieved in it was without precedence.. This was the meeting ground of Czechs, Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans of traditional scholars as much as of the leftist intelligentsia. It even served as a point of encounter within the Russo-Ukrainian community itself which provided a very important source for the Circle. The presence of several excellent Russian and Ukrainian linguists with existence experience in analytical work proved crucial in making Prague a leading place of scholarship.

But how did such unusual integration proceed in detail? Among the ingredients in the emerging circle were Mathesius' determination and the liberal atmosphere of

Masaryk's Prague, in which a multinational pool of interested scholars could be transformed into an enthusiastic group. Yet despite all these prerequisites, the emergence of the circle was by no means a simple consequence of all these components. Mathesius' dinner did not immediately bear fruits. Determined as Mathesius was and devoted as the members were, the overall impression is that no strikingly new quality was achieved when the circle began to function publicly in 1926. Years were passing and the circle was still like any other traditional scholarly society. Thus the process of amalgamation required yet another ingredient. It was dispatched by the ubiquitous actor the *Zeitgeist* and its name was collectivism. The First World War radically changed attitudes towards the usefulness and desirability of liberal individualism. Mathesius, too was close to this new thinking since he believed that the Czechs rather than being original individualists were actually better at collective work. In his "Czech Science," one of the essays in *Cultural Activism* he deplored the fact that research in the last decades had tended towards narrow-minded specialization and that bold attempts at synthesis were not appreciated. He was furthermore disappointed about the isolationism of Czech scholars manifested in their unwillingness to participate in the international circulation of ideas and he was upset about the general lack of communication among scholars. He thought, however, that collective actions were a promising key to the solution:

This is not a situation which could not be changed. It is true that we are not distinguished by individual courage. Our courage is of a more corporate character.... but given the fact that we were not endowed with individual courage or perhaps that its tradition has not evolved here one cannot say that it is impossible to create conditions for fostering it in research for instance by creating a favourable atmosphere or by supplementing it with our corporate courage. (Mathesius 1925:89)

Indeed the epoch was not enamored of what was termed "excessive individualism" and placed much confidence in the collective. A desire for ideologies transcending the liberal "free interplay of interests" was growing. A society with meaningful goals one in which the individual would renounce his personal whims in favour of higher interests was widely discussed. Curiously this sentiment cut across political persuasions and so the idea of collective constructivism was not only in the air among the admirers of the new Soviet state, but also in the liberal circles to which Mathesius belonged. when the First Congress of Slavic Philologists met in Prague in 1929, the Prague circle presented its famous *Theses*, a comprehensive program of research as a manifesto worked out collectively by its members not signed by individual members. A year later the Statutes of the circle defined the activities for the Circle as the collective work of a group of scholars united by a common *Welt anschauung*. All the major protagonists of the circle in particular Mathesius and Jakobson were imbued

with the spirit of collective action. It was at the very moment when the *Theses* were being worked out that Mathesius' problem was finally solved and a new quality began to emerge. Important testimony to this change is the following passage from a letter by Jakobson to Trubetzky dated April 16, 1929:

The active core of the circle has concluded that in its function as a parliament of opinions as a platform for free discussion, the Circle is a relic and has to be transformed into a group which is tightly interlocked as far as scientific ideology is concerned. This process is taking place at present with much success. An initiative committee of sorts has established itself in the circle including Mathesius the very able linguist, Havranek, Mukarovsky, Trnka and myself. This transformation of the Circle literally inspired its members ; in fact, I have never seen such a degree of enthusiasm in Czechs at all. (Jakobson 1975: 122,fn.4)

As to the role of the group leader, a crucial ingredient in this situation Jakobson and Mathesius seem to have shared it without really being competitors. Mathesius seems to have occupied a senior position because he was academically well established and enjoyed general public recognition (see his public activity alluded to above). Jakobson on the other hand was the cementing force within the circle. Milada Souckova a *femme de letters* and a contemporary observer later recalled:

He knew everyone and he knew how to make everyone interested in the activities of the circle. When by chance he was not present because he was detained by his University duties in Brno the usual zest of the meeting was missing. It seems to me that the audience was waiting for him especially for his part in the discussion which followed every lecture. (Souckova 1976:2)

Thus the Circle asserted itself through collective texts and through a distinct type of collective behaviour. In deliberately treading the idea of the collective it soon turned into more than merely a school of linguistics. The feeling that the circle was a unique phenomenon is well documented not only in reminiscences but also in contemporary reflections and reports. Witness the following lengthy passage which contains among other things such relevant phrases as "intimacy of atmosphere," "mutual attraction," "identity of intellectual interests":

With the Prague Linguistic Circle an institution has come into existence which in a number of respects represents something new in our scholarly life.

First of all, one must stress that the heart which drives and regulates the entire activity of the circle is scholarly discussion. (In our country) neither learned societies nor scholarly bodies are able to create an atmosphere in which discussion can flourish... The Prague Linguistic Circle is an exception to this. In its meetings, which take place twice a month, and are alternately located in the English Department of Charles University and in members' apartments, more than half of the time is reserved for discussion; and it is usually quite difficult to make the participants go home, notwithstanding the late hour. In my opinion there are two reasons for this: first the intimacy of the atmosphere which is a result of the fact that the circle is a closed society whose members have grown together through frequent contact; secondly, there is an identity of intellectual interests which exercises mutual attraction.

Of the Circle's *Theses* Mathesius wrote..

This program (of modern linguistic research), presented to the Prague Congress of Slavists in the form of theses, later printed in French on the first twenty-nine pages of the first volume of the *Travaux*, is a result of genuine collective scholarly work. The participants in the Congress may, of course, say that one chapter is worked out according to suggestions of a certain member of the circle and the other according to those of another, yet the final formulation is the result of joint work in which individual authorship gave way to collective effort. (Mathesius 1929 : 1131)

And another member of the circle, the Czech literary scholar Otakar Fischer, observed in the 1930s: "What characterizes the method of the members of the Prague Linguistic circle is their collective way of acting, the collective character of their tactics of their fight" (O. Fischer 1932:269). Milada Souckova's observation too is of special value in view of this group-dynamic process:

The language of the meetings was another characteristic of the circle. Seldom was a Czech without an accent heard. Even those who hardly knew how to speak any other language but their native Czech acquired a kind of queer pronunciation after some time. (Souckova 1976:2)

A group is of course, not sufficiently defined merely by the facts that group-fusion has taken place and that the identification with the group has grown strong. It is also important to establish the manner in which such fusion is achieved. The evidence



available indicates that the Circle was rather radical in this respect. Consider the following statement by Jakobson:

already in 1929, during the Congress of Slavists in Prague, (the Circle) presented itself as a militant and disciplined organization, with precise programmatic theses. The novelty of the structure of this circle, in contrast to the traditional type of scholarly society, appears in the fact that the circle renounces carrying out the task of a parliament containing diverse currents and proclaims openly in its by-laws that it aims collaborating in the progress of linguistic research on the basis of the structural functional method and that the activity of any member of the circle which shows itself in opposition to this program will result in his exclusion. (Jakobson 1933:636/4)

This quotation explicitly introduces a new and significant point: dissident members could be formally excluded. While in a non-radical group it is likely that members would voluntarily leave or fall into oblivion due to lack of enthusiasm or interest, a radical group reserves the right to punish by explicit expulsion.

Thus the Prague Circle achieved a new quality and status—not only because of its radicalism and explicit formulation of such mechanisms as a formal expulsion but also because it consciously emphasized collective work. While (some degree of) loyalty to the group as witnessed in other schools, is an automatic component of the group process collective work was a value per se in the Prague circle.

The lengthy process sketched above raises issues requiring detailed analysis. Many fall within the domain of group sociology, thus qualifying as questions about the external history of scholarship. But the enterprise of the circle was scholarly, its primary challenge was intellectual. The circle formed around a set of intellectual problems which arose both within and outside the field of language inquiry. This intellectual dimension was reflected among other things in subtle relationships between the development of scholarly concepts and the guiding socio-cultural images of the time. Technically, the circle was engaged in three major projects: linguistics, aesthetics and language culture. The impact of contemporary cultural ideology on linguistics, and phonology in particular—is not decisive. On the whole the development of the Prague phonology was predetermined by developments internal to the discipline prior to the formation of the circle. Nonetheless even in phonology important links between *Weltanschauung* and theory-formation can be attested in the work of Nikolai S. Trubetzkoyl, who, together with Jakobson was the chief phonologist of the circle. I will not address this particular issue (cf. Gasparov 1987), but instead I wish to concentrate on another area in which *Weltanschauung* and scholarship influenced on e another.

A prominent field in which the spirit of time profoundly affected the contents of scholarship was the theory of "language culture," that is, approximately the maintenance of standard literary language and language planning. The idea of language culture was rooted in the assertion that language is a social phenomenon. This concept continued the tradition of French linguistics and remained a hall mark of the Circle although some late work undertaken within the Prague framework such as Jakobson's *Kindersprache, Aphasie and allgemeine Lautgesetze* (1941) are not entirely consistent with it. More importantly, however, at that time this conception of language also invited the idea that language is a domain of intentional social action, a field open to intervention of scholars. Thus, the Prague theory of language culture provides a paramount example of a merger of cultural ideology and scholarship; the Circle cultivated an activist attitude par excellence towards language. In other words, if language is a malleable entity, linguistic activists do not have to remain mere onlookers. In characterizing contemporary society as striving towards rationality and a scientific approach, Jan Mukarovsky clearly implied that linguists should be involved in the organization of culture and in the "control of signs" :

all contemporary cultural life is characterized by a more and more intensive intervention of science in organization of diverse social values. Independently of political persuasion and in a broad variety of social fields, an increasingly strong tendency towards a transition from economic anarchy to a more rationalized and planned production is being encountered. The necessity to organize language culture is becoming increasingly necessary.... Yes, we want linguistic regulation just as we want the overdue architectural regulation, of cities but a regulation which is determined by the goals of today not by archaic or "archaizing" considerations (Mukarovsky 1933:2)

The language of the Circle was remarkably consistent in this respect:

In the same way as social reconstruction assumes an ever more planned and goal-directed character and as an ever greater number of system of social values enters into the circle of planned economy, the production anarchy in the life of a language system is also condemned to retreat step by step in the face of planning and regulation. (Jakobson 1934: 325/4)

This was wholly in line with the image cultivated among the progressive intelligentsia who also expected linguists to pursue meaningful, organized, constructive work and not to remain mere onlookers.

It is quite remarkable and future study must address this issue in greater depth how ideas of social interventionism converged in the circle despite the members'

clear generational and national differences, so that, particularly in the 1930s the individual scholars virtually assimilated to one another in this respect. Thus, the old liberal Mathesius also spoke of "order", a somewhat unusual expression for him in view of his earlier opinions. and wrote essays with unpleasantly Germanic titles such as "The will to Culture". (The essay actually reads quite unmythically.) Jakobson did not avoid a somewhat dark excursion, either, when, in quest for intellectual synthesis, he came to see Ottmar Spann among the spiritual allies of the new wholistic concepts in scholarship. Spann, an Austrian social philosopher, was not only a foremost advocate of a conservative organic society ,but also of political visions of law and order that soon brought him close to the philosophy of National Socialism. (No more references to Spann occur in Jakobson's writings in the 1930s.)

Although by far not complete ,the above sketch has explicated the embedding of the Prague Linguistic circle into the cultural milieu of the Prague of the inter-war period. In addition, it has identified one of the most characteristic (and most neglected) features of the Circle, its collective nature. Also this feature rather transparently relates to guiding images of contemporary social thought. Of course, a study that emphasizes a great deal of cultural and social aspects of scholarship faces the danger of relativism and uninspiring sociologism. Thus a remainder is appropriate not to let go under the fact that the enterprise of the circle was a scholarly one and that intellectual challenge lay at its bottom. The circle was not a conspiracy of professors seeking permanent positions-- as vulgar interpreters often believe school formations are about-- but a response to specific problems which arose both within and outside the field of language inquiry. And while each of the scholars found guidance by the *Zeitgeist's* invisible hand and support in the group of his peers each piece of invention had to go through an individual mind. In this sense this essay was not about inventions. It only provided the background that was nourishing them.

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