

CHAPTER IV. LONTACI AND LUFTACI: RESEARCHING THE URBAN/RURAL OPPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY CZECH SOCIETY THROUGH ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore cultural positioning via online discussions beneath news articles and on Facebook, which serve as a mobilising force against the Other. We focus on the context of two abstracted and binarily opposed groups related to the urban-rural split that has been crystallising in the Czech online space and was particularly acute in early 2013 when our research was undertaken. We depict these two imaginary groups here as the *lontáci* and the *luftáci*.³⁵

The expansion of online communication and social networks is not only transforming modes of public debate, but is consequently playing a fundamental role in the gradual polarisation of the mentioned groups that we observed.³⁶ Our chapter is

³⁵ Both these nicknames come from German words. *Lonták* (pl. *lontáci*) is a colloquial dialectical word derived from the Austrian German pronunciation of “*Land*” in the sense of countryside. The word was used in several Moravian towns (and heard by one of the authors in Brno and Jihlava) with the meaning “hillbillies.” Similarly, *lufták* (pl. *luftáci*) is a slang and derogatory word used by countryside dwellers particularly in Bohemia to describe urbanites who visit the countryside for a “breath of fresh air” (*Luft* in German).

³⁶ Several chapters in this volume analyse examples of the transmuting of human society’s functioning and people’s experiences caused by the digitalising of communication connected to expanded Internet usage: Vladimír Černý’s chapter considers changing perceptions of the authenticity of photographs; Michaela Fišerová’s contribution looks at the

intended as a case study which presents some options for the analysis of the ways that Internet social networking and discussions create and spread the meanings and beliefs of particular interest groups and the growing role of these media in forming popular discourse. The function and importance of online forums and social networks in public discourse are discussed in the next section. We emphasise the need for a compromise stance when it comes to deciding between an optimistic and pessimistic view of the Internet as a public space.

Optimists see the Internet space as the most democratic form of the public sphere so far thanks to the absence of time and space constraints and the option of degrees of anonymisation. These factors, they say, lift many of the restrictions intrinsic to other public spaces and allow for a far more open and fair clash between diverse opinions and perspectives. The Internet has, thus, enabled opinions that were previously almost entirely marginalised to enter the public debate. On the contrary, pessimists warn that instead of taking advantage of the diversity of voices on Internet forums, the online public has tended to remain restricted within domains of the like-minded, and as a result, the Internet public space is more fragmented than any other area of the public sphere where like-minded people can gather without any time and space constraints [Lindbloom 2010: 505, 506].

Our interest in these culturally defined oppositions emerges from our previous concern with the hybrid cultural forms of “peasant urbanites” or “rurbanites,” which have appeared at different points in the modern and recent historical and geographical context - from *fin-de-siècle* Prague to the *gastarbajteri* neighbourhoods of Vienna and Paris in the 2000s. In our previous work, we were predominantly interested in the acculturation of rural strata in urban settings. In 2013, we witnessed a series of events in our own Czech domestic context that put an end to our optimistic syncretism. New and exclusionary narratives of the *lontáci* and the *luftáci* started to appear, mirroring not only the uneven development exacerbated by the

economic crises at the turn of 2000 and 2010, but also more general attitudes to the post-socialist transformation of Czech society. Key events, widely discussed in the Czech media as well as in popular means of expression such as online discussions and Facebook, included the following: the second round of the presidential elections in January 2013, discussions about the presidential appointment of university professors and the premiere of the movie *Babovřesky*. The public debate was also inflamed by changing media approaches based on increasing efforts to elicit emotional responses from spectators rather than deliver plain information.³⁷

As Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner [2012: 60] have argued, research designs aiming to systematically compare simultaneous reactions to relevant societal and political events in different online forums are akin to research designs à la natural experiments. We argue that these events had crucial meanings in the formation of the narratives of the two distinct taste-based groups (or rather hate groups) whose expressions this article tries to detect and analyse:

As individuals imagine both their individual and communal identities in discourse, they do so based on their perception of such shared expectations. In the online environment, there are no other markers of community. [...] Unlike geographical communities, online communities are often based solely on the discursive behaviours that express these social relationships both witnessed and enacted by participants in the discourse. In such communication, the expectations and the expression of those expectations must occur simultaneously in an ongoing process in order to sustain perceived common identity. [Howard 2008: 202]

POPULAR ONLINE DISCOURSE

We consider online discussions (such as those under news articles or on Facebook) to be a distinct expression of popular discourse. We understand discourse as the sum of conceivable speech which

³⁷ For more information about the exploitation of human emotions in the news, please see Štěpán Pudlák's chapter in this volume.

can be said about a certain topic within a certain collective. Popular discourse is not moderated by the mass media, but is instead spread largely by word of mouth, through the non-mainstream media or through online discussions, as we have seen more recently. Robert Glenn Howard [2008] terms online discourse the “vernacular web” in order to distinguish such content from institutional discourse: “The vernacular web emerges in specific network locations as a communal invocation of alternate authority” [p. 192].

There is a close relationship between discourse and social structure. Discursive practice serves to constitute meanings and construct the world [Xu 2012: 16]. According to Yulia Mikhailova [2011], online discussions are sources of non-elite public debates. As they usually convey the immediate reactions of dozens or even hundreds of readers, these debates encompass information about their participants’ attitudes and perceptions [Mikhailova 2011: 525]. Lin and Tong [2009] put it:

Different subject positions are adopted by these forum discussion participants to draw, maintain, and shift the boundary between “self” and “other” in different storylines projected in their messages. [p. 289]

Online discussions are a significant part of the popular discourse and, thus, provide discussants with the space and tools to continuously select, construct and negotiate their identities. This formation of their cultural identities is also tied to the discursive construction of cultural Others [Lin and Tong 2009: 289], conditioned by class-based structures and according to the prevalent ideology. The concept of discourse may itself be problematised based on the Althusserian critique of Foucault put forward by Slavoj Žižek [1994], who argues that we need to re-introduce the concept of ideology into an often endless “discursive analysis”:

Foucault never tires of repeating how power constitutes itself ‘from below’, how it does not emanate from some unique summit: this very semblance of a Summit (the Monarch or some other embodiment of Sovereignty) emerges as the secondary effect of the plurality of micro-practices, of the complex network of their interrelations. However, when he is compelled to display the concrete mechanism of this emergence, Foucault resorts to the

extremely suspect rhetoric of complexity, evoking the intricate network of lateral links, left and right, up and down [...] a clear case of patching up, since one can never arrive at Power this way - the abyss that separates microprocedures from the spectre of Power remains unbridgeable. Althusser's advantage over Foucault seems evident: Althusser proceeds in exactly the opposite direction - from the very outset, he conceives these micro-procedures as parts of the ISA; that is to say, as mechanisms which, in order to be operative, to 'seize' the individual, always-already presuppose the massive presence of the state, the transferential relationship of the individual towards state power, or - in Althusser's terms - towards the ideological big Other in whom the interpellation originates. [p. 13]

The widespread use of the Internet has undoubtedly increased the chances of encountering and observing different opinions and attitudes and engaging in discussions with others with opposing positions, but there is an ongoing debate about whether people actually take advantage of this or instead use the Internet to filter information and interactions. Some studies support the idea that "the internet is being used by many people to encounter difference that they would not normally encounter in everyday life." [Dahlberg 2007: 829, 830] Other research shows that people return to their preferred sites to read and interact with those who hold similar views:

Research of online groups shows that even those groups focused upon (political) issues and expected to involve diverse opinions often simply develop into ideologically homogeneous 'communities of interest'. The internet contributes to a fragmentation of the public sphere [...] deliberating groups that are more or less insulated from opposing positions. The internet not only extends social fragmentation, but also has become a breeding ground for group polarization and extremism. [Dahlberg 2007: 830]

However, our analysis of online discussions, especially those concerning mainstream online newspaper articles, reveals an ongoing discussion among people with various values and attitudes though this usually splits into two main positions whose holders jointly fight the other side. Thus, we may observe the simultaneous forming of groups with homogenous attitudes, which

probably helps to reinforce those views,³⁸ but this is all thanks to their engagement in debate with the holders of opposing opinions.

RESEARCHING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Online discussions are a distinct and easily accessible resource for analysing popular discourse. Our research started with the hypothesis that the creation of consensual meaning, and the forming and reshaping of identities based on a description of “Us” opposed to an “Other,” all happen in discussions on the Internet and in public spaces not moderated by the mass media. We decided to study Facebook forums and comments on blogs/articles since these were a distinctive and easily available resource for analysing popular opinions, attitudes and views. In our opinion, online discussions form a new public space and supplement or even replace traditional oral ways of negotiating popular meanings. Online discussions are simultaneously exemplars of the discourse and the result of the popular reception of various agenda setters ranging from the largest mainstream media to peripheral and extremist websites, blogs and Facebook groups. Thus, we consider the analysed online discussions to be a record of the continuous creation, reshaping and reinforcement of popular discourse.

The popular opinions recorded in online discussions are not necessarily opposed to those of dominant powers, but their vernacular character tends to express two different kinds of authority: the mainstream one which they discuss and their own. As one commentator puts it: “Seeking alternatives to the institution, the vernacular often opens authority to the heteroglossia of the community” [Howard 2008: 206].

According to the authors of the article “Analyzing Internet Forums: A Practical Guide,” online discussions can be considered “a kind of unmoderated virtual focus group, in which members of a community discuss topics without a researcher interfering and possibly influencing the expression of thoughts” [Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner 2012: 56]. These discussions, thus, offer relatively

³⁸ We may also consider the concept of framing, which is elaborated in the chapter by Valentina Marinescu in this volume.

authentic natural data. Moreover, contributions “provoke new and often more detailed responses, which may clarify the thinking about an issue in groups, more effectively than in individual interviews” [Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner 2012: 56].

On the other hand, no relevant socio-demographic information is provided about users apart from the identity that they present online (which is probably slightly more reliable in the case of Facebook than for other forums). This presented identity is, however, also part of the promotion of ideas and attitudes (i.e. the opinions propagated by someone describing themselves as a worker are meant to be regarded as a worker’s opinions).

Another disadvantage is the significant tendency of individuals to adhere to more extreme and aggressive statements online than they present in face-to-face communication because of the contributor’s anonymity and the deindividuation of online opponents as well as regular attempts at trolling. However, some research shows that to a large degree, users of Internet forums express their own attitudes on particular topics even if they often do this in an aggressive manner. [Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner 2012: 56]

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From an ethical point of view, contributions to open Internet forums and online discussions (which can be read by anyone) should be seen as public behaviour, and thus, it is not necessary for researchers to obtain the informed consent of users. At the same time, researchers should avoid listing potentially identifying information about individual users such as their nicknames or directly quoting their postings because these can easily be found via Internet search engines. As Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner [2012] note:

Nevertheless, there is indeed a trade-off issue here between protecting privacy on the one hand, and transparency and accessibility of data, on the other. The researcher needs to consider how much information to provide, on a case-by-case basis. [Pp.56-57]

For these reasons, we have elected only to quote our own English translations of postings along with the initials of the nicknames of their authors. This should sufficiently hinder the potential identification of discussants via search engines.

“US AND THEM”: THE BROADENING GAP

In our research, we have used the instrumental labels “*lontáci*” and “*luftáci*” to tag the emblematic and binarily opposed groups that emerged both in online discussions and the public consciousness and were later utilised in political struggles. As outlined in the popular discourse, a dividing line can be traced between urbanites and province dwellers as well as between self-declared elites and ordinary people. This division is related to the socio-economic gap in Czech society originating in the different outcomes of the post-socialist transition of the 1990s.

Since the late 1990s, there has been a gradual observable rise in the reciprocal demarcation of these two groups, which are mutually constructed categories of “Us” and “Them,” along with an emphasis on polarising attributes. This is a part of the gradual disintegration of the post-socialist hegemonic consensus which was led by urban elites based on a simplistic orientation towards the West. That orientation involved acquiring proper Western values anchored in either a liberal or conservative world view, or attitudes accompanying the demand for an overall change from a socialist to a Western capitalist society and from collectivism to individualism, egalitarianism to a meritocracy and bureaucracy to oligarchy.

The dissatisfaction of part of the non-elite strata with both the commenced course and the call for the transforming of not just their economic behaviour but also their entire attitude based on globalised patterns, had already begun in the early 1990s. But the distrust and backlash grew soon after the first economic problems of 1993-1994; they burgeoned again in 1997-1998 along with factory closures in fringe regions and growing poverty and unemployment. During the first decade of the 21st century, despite the pre-crisis economic growth, there was resistance to the imposed culture and values, and this was often coupled with post-socialist nostalgia. This was, however, due to several dominant Czech anti-communist narratives that related in particular to the 1968 Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia and differed greatly from the scenarios described in some other post-socialist countries [Velikonja 2008; Gille and Todorova 2010]. In its anti-communism,

the Czech post-socialist nostalgia was most likely only comparable to the post-socialist nostalgia detected in Poland and the Baltic states:

The inclination to local, socialist and national culture was often presented in most of the Czech mainstream media as an inability to adapt oneself to the new conditions, or as a sign of backwardness. The 'bad taste' of the audience was seen not only as a sign of a lower class status but also as a symptom of a "post-communist mentality" inappropriate in the quickly westernized Czech society. According to Bourdieu's concept of distinction, the non-globalized taste labelled as nostalgic and obsolete was used to distinguish the urban elites (who participated in the economic development) from the rural and small town lower classes whose post-Velvet revolution expectations were mostly not fulfilled. [Daniel, Kavka and Machek 2016]

The overall idea of "winners" and "losers" of the transition should, however, be examined most carefully to avoid reproducing "self-Orientalizing narrative tropes" and self-congratulatory narratives by the winners [Danilova 2014]. Nostalgia or alleged nostalgia can, thus, be seen as part of a rhetorical game in the quest for prestige in a post-socialist society. In his paradigmatic study, Michał Buchowski [2006] analyses similar narrative patterns in post-socialist Poland. "Masses" of rural, uncivilised and mud-stained inhabitants of *Polska-B* were blamed by the urban, highly cultured and clean-shaven representatives of the "Polish economic miracle," who depicted them as bearers of a collectivist spirit that imprisoned Poland in "the East," obviously synonymous with state socialism or "communism."

A flagrant example is the 2008 and 2009 advertising campaign of Prague radio station Expres FM, which characterises itself as a "modern metropolitan radio station oriented to contemporary and high-quality music" [Expres FM 2015]. The station announced, that they had started to broadcast up-to-date music reflecting the programming of respected world radio stations for intelligent, discerning listeners. The advertising campaign was based on a picture of a dunghill with a pitchfork stuck into it along with a pair of rubber boots, all exemplifying the main negative aspects of rural life and accompanied by the slogan "We don't play this." A later advertisement even showed a country resident with a

“mullet” haircut and denim jacket whose old tractor was parked in a barn beside a similar slogan: “We don’t play [music] for him.” There could be no clearer expression of the superiority of the metropolitan, globalised culture of intelligent, discerning urbanites over the world of outdated, dull and foul-smelling provincials.

LONTACI: THE SEARCH FOR NEW ELITES?

Although the nostalgic revival of depoliticised late socialist culture started in the mid-1990s along with rapid development and competition around privatised audio-visual media, the most conservative genres like brass band music were seen as predominantly rural and not part of the mainstream media’s scramble for nostalgic cultural products. Brass band music and its modern variants, which can be characterised by the German terms “*Schlager*” (greatest hits) and “*Volkstümliche Musik*” (folksy/folk-type music), survived via regional public radio broadcasting, and their renaissance is associated with the non-mainstream record label *Česká Muzika*. Its business model relied on TV marketing since these records were otherwise not played by the mass media. This success led to the development of a media conglomerate including the *Šlágr TV* channel. The popular discontent was, thus, transmuted into an effort to establish and defend people’s own values and culture which had been disdained by urban elites and the majority of the mainstream media under their control. On the one hand, this effort was ridiculed and criticised by urban elites, but on the other, it was used in the promotions of cultural entrepreneurs such as Karel Peterka, founder of the *Česká muzika* label. He began employing this opposition to globalised urban elites and their cultural taste and values to promote the output of this label and later TV channel.

A significant example of these developments was the massive open air concert by the duo “Eva and Vašek” held on Říp hill in 2009. At this time, top-selling interpretations of folk-type music were the flagship of the *Česká muzika* label as well as a target of mockery among young urbanites and the mainstream media. Karel Peterka organised a concert on a hill which is closely

tied to Czech mythology,³⁹ and it was set to attract record-breaking crowd despite the scorn of the mainstream media and elites. The event was meant to display the real popular culture beloved by ordinary Czechs. As part of the campaign, it was revealed that despite the cold and rainy weather, about 20,000 tickets had been sold although there were only 3,000 to 6,000 attendees. - People had been buying tickets without any plans to attend just to show their support for the singing duo against a media offensive led by the tabloid *Blesk*. It was hard to say whether it was part of the organising campaign or a sign of its success that some participants carried placards bearing rhymed slogans. They read: “A warm welcome to Eva and Vašek, but if anyone’s here from the tabloids, they can go to hell!” and “Don’t believe the *Blesk* people. They just write rubbish; only the biggest idiots print libel.”

The less grandiose precursor of this event was a unique brass band music festival “*Dechovka byla je a bude*” [Brass band music was, is and ever will be] held in Prague in 2006. This festival, which featured performances by the most popular brass bands and a parade on the streets of Prague, aimed to demonstrate the popularity of this genre in the capital which had been hostile towards it. The concerts were recorded by several Central European radio and TV stations though not by Czech public TV. The rhetoric of the organisers and participants resembled that of the conquerors of a lost territory.

This polarisation culminated in an open struggle in 2013 when several controversial events took place. We have focused our research on three of these events which echoed furthest across Czech society: the second round of the presidential elections in January 2013, the debate about the presidential appointment of university professors and the premiere of the movie *Babovřesky*.

The second round of the first direct presidential elections in the Czech Republic was billed as a conflict between the two mentioned groups. It prompted a massive response from voters (for the first time probably since the Velvet Revolution, people wore

³⁹ The forefather of the Czech nation looked out on the Czech lands from *Říp* hill and decided to settle there.

badges supporting their candidate, for example). The election ended with the victory of Miloš Zeman, presented as a left-wing candidate, who had major support in the smaller towns and villages and the former industrial regions. By turns liberal and conservative, his opponent Karel Schwarzenberg prevailed in the large Czech cities and received the most enthusiastic support from young urbanites. Although the overall breakdown of votes was 55% to 45%, Schwarzenberg only won a majority in the Prague region. However, the division of votes was not only based on geographical characteristics. Zeman was, for example, also elected by Prague's "housing estate" suburbs and Schwarzenberg was favoured by the cultural and economic elites in small towns.

Our research focused on online discussions where the demarcating discourses were already established and election campaign arguments were adopted to match the existing popular discourse. The core of the discussion, however, was not only the personalities of the candidates, but the depiction of "Us" and "Them." As the majority of mainstream media journalists (especially from the press) were open Schwarzenberg supporters, the discourse from below honed in on them as the most visible members of the urban elite and the "Prague café" (*pražská kavárna*) set, which became a synonym for this socioeconomic group. The debate raged at full strength in the following months, stimulated by controversial new topics in the public sphere, which testified to its importance in the popular consciousness. The *lontáci* expressed anger and annoyance at the way that urban elites wanted to dictate their political opinions and educate them generally and had judged their intelligence and cultural taste. One commenter put it:

They're mostly annoyed by the fact that "simpletons", ordinary people have rejected the would-be intellectual elites and expressed their own opinions in the elections. [S. 18. 05. 2013]

The same resistance to the imposing of values and cultural taste along with efforts to establish and defend the values and taste integral to ordinary Czechs (and Czechness) were connected with the release of the popular comic film *Babovřesky* in February 2013. Its director, Zdeněk Troška is the successful creator of some of the most popular Czech comedies which depict village life as a series of ongoing but humorous conflicts among rather

unsympathetic characters (who are nevertheless popular with the public); these plots are based on *typický český smysl pro humor* [the typical Czech sense of humour], a characteristic Czech style of comedy featuring folksy and off-colour jokes. Not surprisingly, these comedies are regarded as over-the-top, dull and not at all funny by the intelligentsia. *Babovřesky* became the most watched film of 2013 the audience of the second *Hobit* film in Czech cinemas. Its premiere provoked online discussions comparable to the ones about the presidency. These fed into the heated popular debate, adding in elements more related to cultural and self-definition since the cultural division was probably sharper than the political one. The debate was marked by strong expressions of pride in people's own taste and in their consciousness as a group which had been denounced by "Them":

According to some critics, I'm an idiot, a nobody, a human with the basest instincts and a low IQ. But you know what? I'm proud of it. When I watch these comedies, I can forget my worries and the craziness of our world. YOU'RE DOING A GOOD JOB, MISTER TROSKA. [Š.M., 22.3.2013]

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Part of the constructed non-elite identity also came from a rejection of globalised American culture in favour of the Czech version, which was seen as pleasant, soothing and nostalgia-inducing. This was closely related to the Central European concept of *Gemütlichkeit* originating in the Biedermeier period:

Dear critics, you're a piece of sh.. and just because people want to enjoy themselves, you give us crap. I definitely won't be watching that American mishmash and those dumb dialogues. If you don't like it, just change channels for your peace of mind. [D.S., 23.2.2013]

The uplifting content of Czech popular culture was contrasted with the current era of crime, violence and swindles brought on by post-revolution development: "A relaxing movie in this era of nothing but deception. It's necessary to laugh too. I give it an A." [J.H., 23.2.2013]

Thus, the category of "Us" denoted those who were not duped by American culture, over-education and all the Western propaganda; people who just wanted to live a peaceful life and relax, undisturbed by the insecurities of the "Big" world; people

who just wanted to enjoy uncomplicated Czech culture and understood its (typical Czech) humour.

Just as Troška's comedies served to define "Us," a dispute over the appointment of university professors became an ideal tool to define "Them": Prague intellectuals and their elite and powerful supporters (as they were depicted in the popular discourse). The dispute arose after the President refused to instate Martin C. Putna as a professor without giving reasons. The media and public speculated that Zeman's aversion to Putna was due to the latter's keen support for the other presidential candidate and his public critique of Zeman's pro-Russian attitudes. Zeman's supporters questioned Putna's eager promotion of Pride parades and his "vulgar" public behaviour, said to be inappropriate for someone wanting to become a professor.

Zeman's critics were seen to personify "Them," the intellectual elites who live an easy life in the metropolis where they do not face "real" problems, but only sit in cafés and try to dictate other people's taste and opinions or conspire to overtake the state, ignoring democratic processes and suppressing the *vox populi*. They were understood to be individuals who had nothing in common with ordinary people, sharing neither their worries nor their leisure pursuits. This opinion finds its grounding in the Czechoslovak Communist Party's depiction of intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s, and it has also been deployed by some post-socialist politicians, notably former president Václav Klaus. It was probably rooted, however, in a much older distrust of elites, who had continually supported alternative regimes over the course of modern Czech history:

The furious braying of the intellectual herd is far from sincere concern about the development of our nation's culture. It's really just the patronising talk of people who need to distinguish themselves through their ridiculous reasoning. To show that they exist somewhere else, above and beyond. [I.Š. 21.2.2013]

Besides their easy life and patronising attitudes, the other important element about the intelligentsia was their uselessness since they were educated mainly in the humanities and social sciences. Their critics noted that not only had they never done any manual work but they were not useful as physicians or

engineers would be and they were even paid from ordinary people's taxes:

I'm just asking what kind of professors gain from their knowledge from the various pseudo universities, which turn out half-literates like hotcakes, [individuals] who are absolutely useless for any role in everyday life, except, of course, in politics and public administration. These are useless researchers who focus on the importance of Viktorín Kornel of Všeřdy for literary activity at the North Pole along with the presence of the nun moth in Patagonia. Just look at the anti-Nobel Prize, as Jan Werich calls it...what fine research for our money. Yes, at the end of the research, there should be some outcome - I am not referring to medical, physical, mathematical, etc. [sciences], but these mumbo jumbo [disciplines]. [I. 18.5.2013]⁴⁰

These intellectuals, it was said, were only concerned with how to get money from the public budget and they usually did so by establishing various useless NGOs:

And if you fear for your academic freedom, then take care of it, but use your own money. It's easy [for academics] to say "Cough up the money and shut up." [K. 18.5.2013]

A similar target was the "cultural front," another 1970s term coined to depict a mostly useless artist who also interfered in policy-making. From the same discussion:

The whole Prague scene has gone totally brain-dead. I'd suggest pouring a bucket of water over it. The absurd relationships of artists, pseudo-artists and provocateurs mean that they not only get to collect grants, but they still want to dictate who should give them those grants. [S. 18.5.2013]

There can thus, be, observed a growing repudiation of the leadership role of the current elites; this was very noticeable in online discussions and utilised for both business and political marketing. The views and attitudes used to define people's own group and distinguish other communities were inspired by varied interest groups, movements and active individuals. They were able to set the agenda, but despite various efforts, there was no significant hegemon of the popular discourse. Contributors to the

⁴⁰ This author's nickname typically means "engineer."

popular discourse made substantial ongoing efforts to expel anyone who might be considered elites as members of the dominant strata:

Economists are antagonising us through the crisis; politicians are just laughing at us and governing only “for themselves”; and the critics are trying to fool us into believing we’re tasteless. [L.Č 27.2.2013] (our emphasis)

To take part in forming the discourse, individuals had to promote themselves as one of the ordinary people. Various online discussion spaces became melting pots that contributed to creating the popular consensus, with values and meanings being formed through fluid exchanges of different opinions and narratives.

LUFTACI: THE BOURGEOISIE STRIKES BACK

The opposite side of this story has to do with the self-perceptions of the Czech Republic’s predominantly urban, well-educated and generally more affluent and influential strata. While in the period of state socialism, there certainly existed a rather tiny traditional elite that in some cases even dated its origins to the eras before the Czech Communist Party’s 1948 takeover of political power, it was only after the fall of state socialism in 1989 that differences in cultural consumption started to serve as a real and distinctive cultural marker. We might also trace the origins of some elitist and anti-elitist narratives to the periods before 1989, however the actual differences between the cultural consumption of urban and rural populations in these eras were practically non-existent when compared to the situation in capitalist core countries.⁴¹

Aside from the state socialist unification of cultural consumption, another factor which served to strengthen Czech egalitarianism had its roots in modern history. The practical absence of an aristocracy understood as nationally Czech in the period of modern Czech state-building meant that Czech national

⁴¹ For more information about “world-system” theory (core-semi periphery-periphery), see Immanuel Wallerstein (1974). *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press.

culture as a whole was plebeian by definition. Compared with the Polish post-socialist elitist discourses [Buchowski 2006] or even those in Serbia and Croatia [Jansen 2006], Czech assertions of “high culture,” “good taste” and anxieties about being culturally oppressed by the “muddied hordes from the hills” had a rather more complex position. These exclusionary narratives were, however, reinforced by the political Right, which strengthened its positions through a popular stance of “anti-communism after the Communists” and like the Right in some core countries that had undergone neoliberal transformations of capitalism, expressed “no shame in being rich.”

These parallel transformations, which might also be seen as simple East/West variations on a single and more substantial battle of capital against the last remnants of the welfare state, were accelerated even more by the economic downturn after 2008. To be fair, it should be added that a prominent cultural figure in these transformations was the *nouveau riche*, an often openly uneducated “self-made man” (rarely a woman) who had everything besides urban upper class roots. As noted above, we leave behind here the hybrid strata of “peasant urbanites” or “rurbanites” and refer instead to the *lufták*, a possessor of maximum cultural rather than economic capital. Nevertheless, this is not someone who lives in poverty in the structurally disadvantaged regions or neighbourhoods and, if he/she does reside there, then that is usually a self-conscious choice, meaning that such a lifestyle, region or neighbourhood is becoming gentrified as new inhabitants linked to the “creative class” [Florida 2002] start to replace those less privileged. This is a well-educated, often young (up to 35 years of age) man or woman who is either self-employed in a small private enterprise or working in academia, and who is nostalgic for the idealised golden ages of café culture, small traders (as distinct from contemporary multinationals) and a bourgeoisie that he/she never witnessed directly - at the end of the 19th century or during the interwar Czechoslovak Republic.

We will try to illustrate these deliberately strong claims by quoting two statements related to lifestyle topics and, in particular, gastronomy. In contrast with the sources of previously quoted examples, these ones come from Facebook communities based on tastes. A common feature of these communities is that they are

often explicit about their relationship with the “lower classes,” consciously representing high culture and “good taste” and promoting members’ self-perception that they are culturally oppressed by popular “bad taste.” In addition, they provide a new and alternative version of conservative clichés about the idealised management of small private businesses (opposed to that of collective or large enterprises).

A Facebook page devoted to alternative cooking, *Vývařovna* (“Cookery,” with 3, 272 “likes” in January 2013, based in Prague) included the following post in response to the results of the Czech presidential elections:

Not even the worst cafeteria food disgusts us this much. Thanks to the hoi polloi for an obvious vote. [Vývařovna, 26. 1. 2013]

Another Facebook page dedicated to the promotion of Italian denominations of coffee sizes, *Piccolo neexistuje* (“Piccolo does not exist,” with 5 481 “likes” in January 2013, based in Prague) reacted to these election results with an ironic reference to the typical dishes of Czech popular cuisine:

DOES NOT EXIST!!! (...with sauerkraut or sausage...) [*Piccolo neexistuje*, 26. 1. 2013]

Martin C. Putna, whom we have already mentioned in relation to the opposition to President Zeman’s election, uploaded a militant video on YouTube and shared it via Facebook in the second half of January 2013 in which he played on the similarity between his own family name and that of Vladimir Putin. Putna presented himself as Putin, invoking stereotypical attributes that many Czechs associate with Russians (a fur hat and a bottle) and using a mix of Russian and Czech words to urge Czech voters mockingly to elect Miloš Zeman as another candidate in the Russian national interest. This might have worked well with one part of the *luftáci* which had expressed strong anti-Russian feelings even before the start of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis that only accelerated the trends of Russophobia and Russophilia in Czech society. It had the absolute opposite effect, however, among the pro-Russian section of the *lontáci* whose comments under the video predominated and were highly critical of both Putna and his message.

The anti-Russian sentiments present in the statements of many *luftáci* coincide with the generally anti-Slavic rhetoric of

Czech post-socialism, which has meant some even prefer to search for the Czech nation's Celtic origins. Pro-Western and pro-Atlantic liberal/conservative narratives have often also had their anti-Slovak, anti-Polish, anti-Hungarian and anti-Balkan complements [Holubec 2015]. Some have found their ideal in the imagined social cohesion and prosperity of Alpine countries as well as in the fair-play ethos of the United Kingdom, while France and the rest of Germany (north of Bavaria) have often been considered "too socialist," and the position towards the Us has been rather controversial. With the unfolding of events, we can also observe an increase in narratives linked to so-called liberal Islamophobia and a "new" xenophobia which criticises Muslims for not respecting the rights of women and sexual minorities and other practices out of keeping with dominant Western world views [Barša 2011; Khair 2015; Rasmussen 2011]. At the same time, narratives that criticise Islamophobia and promote multiculturalism can also be found among the *luftáci*. Anti-Russian feeling, however, remains their most distinctive marker and this is often expressed in terms of a "new" xenophobia.

We believe that the anti-Russian feeling of the *luftáci* results from "inner orientalism," as described by Michał Buchowski [2006]. The problem for the *luftáci* is not so much Russia itself or Russians as the latter's presumed similarity to Czechs and in particular to the Czech populace. Boris Buden [2009] has described "post-communism" as "bombing the East into culturality" through the infantilisation of the East European masses who were seen as "not yet grown-up Western adults." The *luftáci* act like they are eager to show the West that they are already adults and it is *lontáci* who need to grow up (or better, to be grown-ups) and emerge from their barbarism.

This kind of narrative is not peculiar to the post-socialist period. Regarding the bourgeoisie and its relationship to the rural strata, Marx and Engels [1848] 1969] stated the following in their "Communist Manifesto":

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.

Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West.

While there are also socially sensitive sections of the *luftáci* who theorise about the “precariat” as a new class and “neoliberalism” as a system, their critique rarely exceeds the limits of bourgeois politics. Additionally, their preference for small businesses over collective ownership and multinational corporations can simultaneously be traced to the ideology of the Far Right and so poses virtually no threat to capitalism. Having said this, it may be concluded that the emergence of the *luftáci*, and in particular, their statements against the *lontáci* are the result of class-based anxiety.

CONCLUSION

So far we have seen that the relations between the *lontáci* and the *luftáci* express a power play between oppositions. Again, it must be stated that both groups are artificial (created by us for the sake of this article) and heterogeneous. We have presented them here as two abstracted types. We would like, however, to suggest now - perhaps surprisingly after all that we have written - that ultimately the opposition between them should not be understood to be as strict as we imagined it at the beginning of our research. In the table below, we have tried to summarise different narratives according to the “nodal points” [Laclau and Mouffe 1985] that we deliberately chose regarding this Žižekian revision of discourse theory:

Tab. 1 Comparison between popular and elitist online narratives

	<i>Lontáci</i>	<i>Luftáci</i>
Tradition	Yes	Yes
Conservatism	Yes	Yes

Xenophobia	Yes	Verbally usually not expressed, but exists in reality
Social awareness	Expressed verbally	Sometimes

When it comes to the importance of “(invented) tradition” [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983], it is notable that for both groups tradition figures as important. Whereas the *lontáci* consciously refer to the myth of the Czech nation’s plebeian origins in order to legitimate their quest for political power, their cultural markers reveal a more postmodernist understanding of tradition. In the case, for example, of the musical duo “Eva and Vašek” discussed above, their musical production could be described as a pastiche of different hybridisations of global cultural trends as well as local ones (folksy music along with ABBA-style disco). Tradition, however, is also hailed by the *luftáci*. The importance of tradition for food bloggers like those from *Piccolo neexistuje* is no less postmodernist; it is expressed in a conscious quest for unique and authentic coffee blends and preparation styles that are also emblematically and rigorously standardised. Similar results emerge from a comparison of conservative narratives. The *lontáci* tend to support patriarchal patterns of gender relations, and the *luftáci*, in contrast, look back with tearful nostalgia to the golden era of café culture.

Some differences between the two groups can be observed in relation to xenophobia. Here we strongly support the idea that xenophobia is a result of social movements originating among the working class. We reject the conspiracy-influenced theories according to which xenophobia is a result of “false consciousness” injected into the working class by capitalists in order to make solidarity among the workers impossible. It is not therefore a surprise to us that the *lontáci* manifest strongly xenophobic views, in particular against Roma people, Muslims and migrants. In contrast, the *luftáci* often identify themselves as anti-racist and many of them promote multiculturalism. This, however can only be understood as a shallow fascination with cultural diversity with no regard to the real nature of differences. Multiculturalism also

mirrors racism by empowering different ethnic groups within artificially created “communities.” In addition, many *luftáci* manifest openly xenophobic views, particularly against Russians but to some degree also against Muslims.

Similar controversies can be observed regarding the social awareness often verbally expressed by the *lontáci* though in reality their solidarity tends to remain limited to their own kin-based reference group and their network of acquaintances. The *luftáci*, on the other hand, only sometimes display social awareness, expressing greater reserve towards the network of acquaintances whom they consider “Oriental.” They either act individually or in the reference group of the nuclear family, which has undergone an important renaissance during the last decade, especially among those who can afford to maintain it. When it comes to social awareness, their predominant interest lies in human rights, defined in terms of basic democratic liberties (freedom of speech and religion, the rights of sexual minorities, electoral freedom, freedom to study and to travel). It should also be added that usually most of their attention is focused abroad (on Tibet, Russia, North Korea, Iran or Cuba).

In light of these factors, we can see that in reality these groups do not differ substantially and their anxieties undoubtedly result from their actual material positions and expectations. Although the difference is not big, it is still perceived as profound, and since 2013 when we conducted our research, it has continued to be exploited politically. Online discussions such as the ones presented in this article provide a very helpful tool for accessing people’s visions. They may prove useful for anyone aiming to politically or commercially mobilise not only these two artificially created groups but also real social movements, subcultures, taste-based groups, scenes and other collective groupings active in cyberspace.