

Observing communicative competences

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My personal 'Prague' started in 1991, two years earlier than the conference's move there. I had finished my dissertation at Freie University in Berlin on the fate of German political scientists from the Weimar Republic to early West Germany. Deep in my brain and head I was a Habermaniac (I have not changed very much since then, I have to admit) but I never went to study in Frankfurt and I was never involved in the complex group dynamics of the younger Frankfurt School group. My interest grew on the topic of modern democratic theory. Jean Cohen's article on Habermas, 'Why More Political Theory?' (Telos, 1979), had thrilled me and so I went to meet her in person at Columbia University in 1990. She told me about the Dubrovnik meetings and its distinctive 'eastern-European-dissidents-meet-western-critical-intellectuals' concept. At her invitation I first attended there in 1991. Spontaneously Axel Honneth and Helmut Dubiel asked me to give a kind of workshop talk on my (probably somehow weird) ideas on how to merge Habermas' theory of communicative competence with rational choice theories. Well, anyway. Soon I got involved with a number of suggestions on my ideas by Ivan Vejvoda, Nancy Fraser, Günther Frankenberg and others. The group and the discussions were tremendous and stimulating and opened a totally new intellectual horizon for me. Even more importantly for me, Jodi Dean and I as the two external 'fresh people' in this group became friends in this year; and we have been close friends since then (even though we may disagree on aliens, Zizek and communism from time to time).

After the intra-Yugoslavian war broke out in the summer of 1991 and parts of the old town of Dubrovnik got bombed the group stuck together. Thanks to Alessandro Ferrara we met at a wonderful place on the Italian island of Ischia, near Naples. However, we all shared the feeling that we had to go back to a place where the old East/West exchange could be preserved. Hana Havelkova suggested Prague as a possible location and thanks to Sandro's activities we were welcomed at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences in May 1993. This was the starting point of a new success story.

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I participated in the Prague conferences with one exception every year from 1993 until 2003. I experienced it as a wonderful place to listen to a lot of work in progress, to present tentative ideas and to discuss them with a range of people from different academic disciplines, from different generations and of different tempers. In my own presentations I used to stick to issues of democratic theory. Prague was the first place in which I gave a paper on secret and public voting which later became the topic of my *Habilitationsschrift*, a large Teutonic tome. Prague also was the place where I learned from discussions about a recent revival of lotteries as an instrument to modernize modern democracies. Later, I turned this topic into another book, so I do owe a lot to the vital discussions we had in this place.

But let us be honest. One has to admit also that some of the papers, which were read in small hot rooms without enough oxygen, were difficult to listen to. After lunch some of us even were falling asleep. So Jodi Dean and I secretly founded a two-person jury which voted on the paper presentation with the best communicative competence (the cc prize). For our set of criteria for the competition, we created a complex mix of Habermas' validity claims of communicative competence and of rhetorical elements of comprehensibility. For nearly 10 years, our medal always went to Maeve Cooke and the intense aura she created with her presentations. Only one time we had serious difficulties to come to a final decision. It was a year in which Axel Honneth gave a new paper on different emotional levels of recognition. He took Hannah Arendt's reflections on the conversations in Rahel Varnhagen's salon in Berlin as an example to emphasize the non-linguistic elements of human communication. However, reading his paper straight from the manuscript he always pronounced the word 'salon' as 'saloon'. This gave his presentation a total different twist and subtext; our little jury decided that Axel deserved the cc prize for the year of 1997.

I experienced Prague as a very open place for discussions. The atmosphere was filled with good humor too. The papers and discussions became a perfect birthplace for books and articles which later could be read in more elaborate detail in *Constellations* and *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, the two *Zentralorgane* of the group. The name *Constellations* as a replacement for *Praxis International* was even created in a meeting in which we were sitting together in the main room of the Prague Institute of Philosophy. The triangle of German critical theory, American liberal philosophy and French-inspired postmodernism never turned into a Bermuda triangle in our debates. In 2002, I had the feeling I had to move on and I quit as co-director. I have been in Prague twice since then and was touched very much emotionally not only to meet old friends again but even more to experience its enduring intellectual vitality.