

Professor Jakub Tyszkiewicz
Institute of History
University of Wrocław, Poland

A review of Denisa Nečasová's habilitation *Nový socialistický člověk. Československo 1948-1956*, Brno 2018

Denisa Nečasová's habilitation thesis is a plain consequence of her earlier studies about social and cultural studies of history of contemporary Czechoslovakia as well as gender studies that resulted in publications about Czechoslovak society and women in the second half of 20th century. In her new book she analyzes a very interesting problem - creating a concept of the new man in Czechoslovakia, since 1948, the idea developed in the Soviet Union but implemented in the countries dominated by the Kremlin in the Stalinist time. In my opinion, there is a very important issue not only in case of Czechoslovakia but also in case of the whole Soviet Bloc during period of so-called full Stalinization (1948-1956).

Undoubtedly, this subject is original and it was not researched yet thoroughly. Although there is a similar book written by the Polish scholar Mariusz Mazur (*O człowieku tendencyjnym... Obraz nowego człowieka w propagandzie komunistycznej w okresie Polski Ludowej i PRL 1944-1956*, Lublin 2009), who considered the view of the new man presenting in Polish communist propaganda, but I have to admit that Denisa Nečasová's approach is much more modern, concise and coherent than presented by the Polish scholar.

My good opinion about her thesis is connecting with the fact that she did not use only a traditional, historical approach in her work, but she looked at the problem in a interdisciplinary way, using a cultural-historical approach, a critical-discursive analysis and also a gender analysis. Using of other methods to analyze the concept of the new, socialist

man enriched her research. Such a methodology allows her to present the problem in a wider context, taking also into account issues of gender studies for instance, in other words, not only describes characteristic features of the concept of the new man but also the role played by the woman in this idea.

In order to present the subject Denisa Nečasová researched many periodicals and pamphlets from the era of the Stalinist period in history of Czechoslovakia thoroughly. She uses those generally (and wrongly) neglected by scholars sources in order to present three forms of the new man - the worker, the woman and the Soviet man. I think that such a division is interesting and justified. Moreover, it enables to compare elements which were used to describe the new socialist man in Czechoslovakia with the model „hero” – the Soviet man.

One of the strongest point of Nečasová book is putting stress on presenting forming of the concept of the new man through centuries. This chapter, based on many foreign secondary sources creates a good theoretical foundation for consideration of the new socialist man. I would also to add that Nečasová showed the historical approach to this problem in a much better way than Mazur's book, mentioned earlier, who also considered methodological problems.

Undoubtedly, one of the interesting conclusions of Nečasová's book is the fact that the new man presented in communist concept as the worker was not too much consisted with an official Marxist-Leninist ideology that presented the worker as a revolutionary who would destroy the old system, in other words, as a shock worker creating a new and just society. During Stalinism the central motif became work alone which took on an anthropological character, transforming man into a coveted form. The uniqueness of exceptional work performance was gradually transferred from the individual to the whole, a unified working collective. The new construct put rather stress on technological progress at the expense of

purely manual labour. Nečasová rightly connects it with the communist efforts of establishment of a new "socialist" era and the transformation of the revolutionary energy to labour, presented as the new battle front in the decisive struggle between socialism and capitalism by communist propaganda.

I found especially interesting Denisa Nečasová's presenting the image of the new woman which was creating in five interweaving forms. She stresses that the methods for constructing a heroic women, which would be equal to men didn't work due to unwillingness to accept women in traditional male positions. She also noted the uncertainty of gender roles due to the discursive forms which combined traditional male and female symbols in the images of women at this time. However, according to her research at the same time one can see less and less putting stress on images of the mother and the housewife and wife in the communist propaganda which, in my opinion can be connected with communists efforts to destroy old social and family's ties that hindered building of the new society, fully dependant on the authorities.

I would also note remarks of D. Nečasová that if in the first two cases (the worker, the woman) one can see some ambiguity of the picture of the new socialist man, the Soviet man is free of any negative elements. She stresses, correctly, the fact of sacral character of that figure, which is a token of the communist system installed in Czechoslovakia in 1948 that dreadfully implemented Stalinist patterns. Nečasová espoused four main features of this „Soviet superman” – the liberator, the friend, the brother and the example for the others. The Soviet man also symbolized the significance of the Soviet Union. I found a very valuable her conclusion that the construction of the USSR as the brother and a friend was politically modified in a Czech context by taking into consideration the traditional role of family. The Czechoslovak model therefore stressed the role of a family of communist countries with the Soviet Union as leader compared to the father. In such a construct the Soviet man had always

to be superior to the Czechoslovak new man, putting stress on the domination of the USSR over Czechoslovakia, presenting often as younger brother. In my opinion we can see similarities in describing the Soviet man in case of Polish communist propaganda of that time, for instance.

Nečasová rightly ascertains that the construction of the new man was to legitimize eschatologically the new communist leadership. The new man allowed to better present a division between the old and the new. He symbolized breaking with the past, out-of-dated values and features and, at the same time, creating a quite new, better reality by communists. Creation of the new man meant legitimating of the new political and social system. Nečasová notes that the new man was to play a role of a model that was to be copied in reality by Czechoslovak men and women. At the same time the new man was to be a new hope for the society by presenting an optimistic utopia vision to be received by Czechs and Slovaks. The concept created a seductive vision of a promising future for individuals and society as a whole, the future that would be not only promising but also irrefutable, due to the historical necessity created by Marxist ideology. He also played a very important political role, legitimizing changes of post-February Czechoslovak history.

An important conclusion of Denisa Nečasová's thesis is connected with the statement that the idea of the new socialist man complemented other ideas of a new, better world presented by communist authorities. However, due to the fact the construct of the new socialist man was created on basis of characteristic elements of modernization (e.g. progress, the omnipotence of science, universally applied values and secularization) it allowed to avoid accusation that the whole idea was imported directly from the Soviet Union, due to the fact that it based, at least in theory, on traditional values of modernization that were present in Europe since the Enlightenment period.

I found particularly interesting Nečasová's statement that even in this "new world" created by communist the new model of woman stood down to the new man. Undoubtedly, it was connected with the fact that a traditional model of the patriarchal family, prioritizing masculinity and men over female and women was still valid (Stalin was presented as a father of the whole Soviet Bloc). Thus women were excluded from the highest echelons of the symbolic power system. The elite group, according to communists was considered mainly as a male entity, characterized by activism, militarism and revolutionary spirit etc. The traditional construct of femininity contrasted with these characteristics. Men and masculinity became a model for women, however that did not mean that they became really equal to men. I found that Nečasová conclusion very valuable, because it shows that she is an objective scholar uses methods of gender studies in a critical way, avoiding simple statements about the alleged equality of women and men in the communist world, which are often formulated by Western scholars who take into account only the picture created by propaganda.

I would find especially interesting and accurate Nečasová's opinion that features of the new socialist man began to change in Czechoslovak propaganda around 1953, however in case of features of the Soviet man one cannot see any changes. The book rightly points out that the concept of the new man began to fall together with the destalinization and efforts of creating a new vision of the society by communists. It worth stressing that the same process is clearly seen in Poland during that time.

To sum up, Denisa Nečasová's habilitation uses proper methodological approach to the topic, the level of the analysis is high and formal criteria are of sufficiently high standard. Undoubtedly, the book should play an important role in developing a Czech historiography of the contemporary era. In my opinion her habilitation should be used by historians as a pattern in doing research of the concept of the new man in other post-communist states as a part of

modern interdisciplinary comparative studies about similarities and differences of the Stalinist system in the Soviet Bloc.

Therefore, I have no doubts that Denisa Nečasová's habilitation meets the standard requirements placed on habilitation thesis in the field.

Jakub Tyszkiewicz