



# The uncivilized society of Czechoslovak tramps. An exploration in proletarian fantasy<sup>1</sup>

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This article examines the relationship between the political theories of Central European dissidents and the social practice of “tramping,” a back-to-nature movement that was associated with oppositional politics and “anti-politics” in Czechoslovakia from the end of World War I until 1989. The article reflects on the potential political significance of the tramping movement’s ideal of *uncivilized* society as an alternative to the dissidents’ concept of “civil society,” which began as a call for “anti-political” transformation, and yet after 1989 became an ideological justification for explicitly elitist modes of liberal-conservative governance. The concept of “uncivilized society,” which can be drawn from the discourse of tramping, has parallels in contemporary autonomist calls for tactical retreats from oppressive modernity. The article concludes that the tramping movement’s emphasis on internal organization best distinguishes the movement both from East-Central European dissent before 1989 and from autonomism today.

## Keywords:

back-to-nature movements, civil society, anti-politics, Czech tramping, Czech tramps, Czechoslovakia

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND OTHER ANTI-POLITICS

*O tramps and pirates; O wolves with worn-out faces;  
O souls stalked by desire; O proletarians of the ages!  
The wild distance made us drunk with exotic clouds of steamy gold,  
And our vagabond flag we hoisted on a pole.  
The first verse of *Tramps’ Heart*, by Géza Včelička, early 1930s<sup>2</sup>*

In the years before 1989, oppositional and countercultural movements in East-Central Europe were marked by a certain exodus from the realm of politics. Observers in the West took most note of the so-called dissidents, who they raised the banner of “apolitical” civil society against the state-centered administration of the Communist Party. In the formulation of Hungarian dissident György Konrád, the model dissident was “antipolitical” and simply desired to be left alone. But in demanding to be left alone,

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2 Unless otherwise stated, the original language cited is Czech. Translations are my own.



the dissident rejected “the power monopoly of the political class” (Konrád 1984: 231) and undermined a political regime that demanded total political control. In Poland, Adam Michnik depicted dissidents in the more activist terms of what he called “anticipatory democracy” (Michnik 1976), as the bases of a future democracy were laid in autonomous oppositional activity, represented most visibly by the independent trade union Solidarity, but also by institutions like the Polish dissidents’ “Flying University.” In Czechoslovakia it was Václav Havel who most eloquently championed “apolitical politics”: a “politics of people, not of the apparatus,” a politics in which dissenters confronted “impersonal power” with “their own humanity” and sought “to make a real political force out of a phenomenon so ridiculed by the technicians of power — the phenomenon of the human conscience” (Havel 1988: 398). For him, as for Konrád, the hero of anti-politics appeared as the thoughtful, publicly moralizing intellectual; and it is worth noting that even in the intellectual opposition connected with Poland’s Solidarity, the ideal of working-class resistance was eclipsed in the course of the 1980s by an ideal of better-thinking, uncorrupted intellectuals (Ost 1990; Ost 2005). Throughout the region, this sphere of activity separated from the state came to be known, especially in the course of the 1980s and 90s, as “civil society.”

The term “civil society” was more widely used in Hungarian and Polish dissident circles than in Czechoslovakia, where it only became widespread after 1989. But even in Czechoslovak context the term came to be used retrospectively to refer to the spaces of relative freedom and opposition that had been known earlier as “underground,” “alternative,” or “parallel.” In a sense, the notion of civility became canonized in what might be called “post-dissident” discourse, which presented the liberal democratic civil society that developed after 1989 as a continuation of the dissident project before it. But a closer look at the variety of unofficial and oppositional activity before 1989 reveals that the ideal of a proper, “civil” society of moral intellectuals was not as monolithic at the time as it came to appear in retrospect. A wide array of non-mainstream practices did not fit easily into the model of an upstanding, rational, civil society that was theorized and popularized by the dissidents and, after the political changes of 1989, by former dissidents and their associates. Among the activities that were broadly understood by as subversive, there were brash avant-garde happenings and punk rock concerts, drug-filled parties and carnivalesque street protests,<sup>3</sup> Catholic pilgrimages and gatherings of folk singer-songwriters. In the Czech Lands, and to a lesser extent in Slovakia, there was also a movement called “tramping.”

The tramping movement, like the oppositional movements around it, was based on a tradition of anti-political politics. Unlike many of these other movements, however, and particularly unlike the activities of dissidents, tramping was a mass movement with a history covering most of the twentieth century. Also unlike many of these movements, tramping traced its origins to an explicit criticism of labor and, through this, to a radically critical view of civilized, industrial society.

In the years after World War I, as young Czech workers returned from the barbarism of war to the banality of factory life, a group of them responded by deciding to take temporary leave of the modern industrial world. During their days off work,

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3 On the more carnivalesque of these activities, see Kenney 2002.



they went into the woods, camped, played sports, and sang songs of adventure and romance. They also abjured adult supervision, disdained hierarchy, and consciously inverted the bourgeois and national-chauvinist values that they saw as dominating their workday world. At first, participants in the new movement called themselves “wild scouts” (*divocí skauti*) in opposition to the respectable and conservative Scouting movement. But soon the young adventurers became more focused on the activities they admired than on those they opposed. “Wild scouts” took on the name of “cowboys” (*cowboyové* or, in later orthography, *kovbojové*), and then, inspired by Jack London’s memoir of his hobo days (London 1916), they became “*trampové*” —tramps. The movement grew rapidly and, by the late 1920s—to the consternation of its earliest adherents—was commercialized, as tramp songs gained popularity in mainstream Czech popular culture. Surviving commercialization, then repression by successive regimes, the movement experienced a revival in the liberalizing atmosphere of the 1960s and expanded from its strictly Czech roots into Slovakia; and after 1968, when Czechoslovak society reached new heights of rigidity and banality, tramping entered what some participants call the movement’s “golden age” (although the term “silver age” might be a more appropriate analytic term). After 1989, when the dissident ideal of civil society became hegemonic, tramping and its uncivilized ideals went through what most tramps describe as serious decline. Through these years, the movement’s attitude toward dominant society oscillated between one of explicit “political” opposition and one of overtly “apolitical” avoidance. The occasionally explicit politics of tramping, however, always maintained an uneasy relationship to politics as traditionally understood, while the tramps’ overtly apolitical activity concealed political significance that was well understood by those who experienced it.

This paper, based on an analysis of published sources as well as personal communication with participants in the tramping movement,<sup>4</sup> is an attempt to trace the continuities and discontinuities of the tramps’ apolitical-political history. Beyond that, however, the paper is also an investigation into the broader significance of tramp (anti-)politics in comparison with the politics of the dissidents, and with an eye toward other movements, in other places and times, that have attempted to change the world without being “political.” The dissidents’ forms of “anti-politics” and “apolitical politics,” as subversive as they proved in the context of authoritarian East-Central Europe, proved after 1989 to be compatible with new modes of domination,<sup>5</sup> and this fact may be taken as a warning to other anti-political movements that may not wish to follow the dissidents’ path. The complexities of the tramping movement in the context of a longer *durée* of opposition in East-Central Europe may shed light on both the limitations and the potentiality contained more generally in anti-political approaches.

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4 The primary research for this paper was conducted in 2006. Although the paper has been considerably revised in the years since then, it reflects the state of research on tramping at the time of its origin. It does not take into consideration the important work that has been written on the movement in the years since, including some by other contributors to this volume.

5 This process has been well described e.g. by Eyal, Szelényi, Townsley 1998 and Eyal 2003.



From a certain perspective, the dissidents' conception of "alternative" or "civil" society appears open and inclusive. Although they put forth their own particular intellectual and artistic activity as an ideal image of dissent, they also depicted called for the creation of a whole "second culture" or "parallel polis" (Benda 1991), where almost any life activity—the authentic lifeworld itself (Havel 1988; Bělohradský 1991a)—could be re-created alongside official, politicized society. Nevertheless, this alternative society was conceived in such a way that only a certain aspects of these activities appeared anti-politically relevant: above all, their facilitation of inter-personal morality. What the dissidents and post-dissidents posed against the sphere of political power was a sphere in which individuals could feel free from external coercion, where individuals could act according to their conscience, without dissimulation,<sup>6</sup> and where individuals could form direct social relationships, free from the "impersonal" bureaucracy of the state.<sup>7</sup>

This is the first point on which, I think, the tramping movement can offer a critical perspective on anti-politics and civil society. The dissident and post-dissident conception of civil society was also, implicitly, a conception of *civilized* society. The dissidents' and post-dissidents' framing of civil society privileged modes of behavior that happened to conform to the interests and manners of cultured elites, and which left a wide array of social activity outside the frame of noteworthy behavior and meaningful discourse. Although the dissidents themselves criticized modern "civilization," they did so against the implicit backdrop of a *more* civilized, early modern way of life. When Václav Bělohradský, an exiled Czech philosopher who heavily influenced the dissidents still in Czechoslovakia, wrote of "renewing public life" as a space of autonomous, responsible individuals, he unmistakably evoked the early modern ideal of bourgeois publicness (Bělohradský 1991c: 135). Havel, more romantic, held up the image of an old farmer (Havel 1988: 384)—but the image was of an independent, landholding farmer, not a landless serf or a wandering farmworker. It could be said that the Czech dissidents' chief indictment of Communist Party rule was that the system did not enable its citizens to act as ideal, autonomous, responsible—bourgeois—citizens. The dissidents did not reflect on the ways that this ideal might be founded on an exclusion of the non-bourgeois from the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> Precisely this principle of exclusion is brought to the fore in the activity of tramps.

The figure of the "tramp," sometimes banished from work and sometimes escaping it, in run through with lines of exclusion and of flight. Participants in the tramping movement, feeling excluded from the prosperity and democracy promised by

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6 This was probably Havel's most significant contribution to dissident thought. His chief criticism was not that the system was inherently immoral, but that it forced people to profess things they did not believe and to act according to a morality that they did not sure (See e.g. Havel 1991).

7 This aspect of civil society, frequently emphasized by Havel, was most fully theorized by Václav Bělohradský 1991b.

8 This is an argument frequently leveled at Habermas's idealization of bourgeois publicness (see e.g. Fraser 1990). This argument has not been sufficiently brought to bear, however, on the discourse of civil society.



industrial society, attempted to transform this feeling of exclusion into an experience of freedom. They laid a claim on freedom from the society that excluded them, and they sought to occupy a position where which they could stand partially outside society and criticize society from without. Out of an antagonism toward politics and labor, they established a mass movement for apolitical leisure. In doing so, they approached and in some ways extended the rejection of politics that was present in classical anarchism (which had a strong presence in the Czech Lands before World War I and likely influenced the tramps' thought<sup>9</sup>). The tramping movement also prefigured more recent rejections of labor (e.g. Tronti 2010; Gorz 1982; Block 1986) and escapes or "flights" from capital (e.g. Deleuze, Guattari 1987; Sakolsky, Koehnline 1993; Moulier Boutang 1998).

On a second point, however, the tramping movement diverges both from the dissidents and from a major tendency in leftist anti-politics. For the dissidents, civil society was to provide a space for social relationships, but these relationships were understood, in an important sense, asocially. Havel called on politics to "return to its only proper starting point [...]: individual people," rather than any "'positive' model" of organization (Havel 1991: 180-1), and on one occasion an interviewer had to prod the future president five times before he reluctantly agreed to describe the social and political structures he envisioned in a better society (Havel, Hviždala 1990: 8-18). What came to be known as civil society, in other words, was thought of as an accumulation of relations between individual persons, not as a social structure. When, after 1989, new social structures emerged that had little in common with the dissidents' pre-revolutionary hopes, they generally saw no recourse but to denounce the personal integrity of individuals involved. They had no clear structural alternative to propose.

It is fair enough for critics of capitalist domination to fault the dissidents for accommodating to neoliberal capitalism, but it is striking that many critics of capitalism share a similar distaste for social-structural analysis of their own movements. A major tendency in anarchist thought has long been to focus on the removal of dominant structures (state, capital), while assuming that free relations would naturally emerge in their absence. To a certain extent this tendency continues in post-structuralist celebrations of the indeterminate and deterritorialized (E.g. Deleuze, Guattari 1987), which accept the de-structured nature of contemporary capitalist society and eschew attempts to re-create order within it or against it. The tendency also continues in certain evocations of a "multitude" whose prime structuring principle is a deliberately under-defined notion of "the common," which bears strong resemblance to the notion of an unstructured civil society. The tramping movement, by contrast, parallels a different anarchist tendency, one that focuses on the political structures internal to social movements, developing new modes of organization and positing them as more

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<sup>9</sup> It would, however, require further research to determine the extent of anarchist influence on tramp thought. The early tramping movement's most immediate points of reference were drawn from its own historical moment, when anarchism as an organized movement had largely given way to the Communist Party and other socialist parties, while the anarchist ethos of an earlier generation of rebellious poets had been largely translated into new terms by the rising avant-garde (see Tomek 2002).



or less generalizable social alternatives. In the tramping movement, the creation of alternative power structures was not always central, but it was always present.

Finally, the tramping movement poses a theoretical challenge in one further respect: it presents a mode of cultural borrowing that has gone largely un-discussed in studies of oppositional culture in East-Central (not to mention Western) Europe: the iconography of uncivilized society, comprising images of marginalized people around the world, with a privileged position granted to images of the American Wild West. The meaning of this iconography is distinct from that of other, more frequently studied Western symbols in Eastern Europe, such as jazz or rock music, which seem to present the West unambiguously as a carrier of progressive modernity (e.g. Mitchell 1992; Szemere 2000; Ostendorf 2003). The tramps' celebration of the *wild* West—of hoboes against bourgeois, backwoodsmen against city-dwellers, Indians against settlers—presents a more complicated picture, in which the West offers simultaneously the prestige of progress and progress's flipside, in a Western-tinged (and, thus, implicitly modern) *alternative* to dominant modernity.

But neither can the tramps' vision of uncivilized society be properly understood through the theoretical lenses developed for the study of analogous cultural borrowing from colonized societies, especially in North American context. Unlike White Americans "playing Indian" (Deloria 1998) or performing Blackness (Roediger 1991; Lott 1993), and unlike colonizing European elites fantasizing about their newly won territories (as provides the focus for much of Christian Feest's volume on playing Indian in Europe; Feest 1987), tramps' connections to European colonialism were always tenuous. Their relationship to the oppressed the people whose culture they borrowed was indirect, mediated through their understanding of colonialism as the work of *other* European and American societies.<sup>10</sup> This relationship is, to be sure, problematic, and not least because of the tendency for the relationship to be misrecognized by people familiar with the Wild West in North American context. But this relationship should be understood with its own set of terms.

## IMAGINING (UN)CIVIL(IZED) SOCIETY

*In Barcelona we shake hands; in Paris again we meet;  
We swing through the freshest air under Canadian trees.  
On diamond mountain glaciers, through Tibet we climb,  
And on our backs we sleep in Neapolitan dives.  
The second verse of Tramps' Heart*

In developing its specific symbolism, the tramping movement drew on Hollywood Westerns and North American adventure novels that would be familiar to most North

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Frayling is unusual among scholars in examining the role of the Wild West imaginary for people not closely implicated in the exploitation of the Wild West, but his case study provides only limited parallels with the case of tramps (see Frayling 1998; see also Mariani 1987).



Americans, in addition to Wild West narratives filtered through European eyes such as those of German novelist Karl May. Tramps began to dress as cowboys and Indians, then as ragged hoboes and “Canadian” woodsmen in flannel shirts. They took on tramp nicknames like “Johnny,” “Mary,” and “Grizzly.” They renamed the river valleys and train lines where they tramped, with the Vltava becoming the “Great River” (*Velká řeka*), the Kocába becoming the “Snake River” (*Hadí řeka*), and a railway along the cliffs over the Sázava River becoming the “Sázava Pacific” (*Posázavský pacifik*). When tramps founded their first regular campsites in the Bohemian (and later Moravian and Slovak) woods, they gave these “settlements” (*osady*) names like “Rawhide” and “Liberty,” they built totem poles to mark the territory, and they elected “sheriffs” (*šerifové*) as their symbolic leaders. When they played and sang around their campfires, they gradually replaced more common local instruments like accordions with guitars, and later with harmonicas and banjos. And beginning in the 1960s, inspired by the North American folk revival, tramps expanded their musical repertoire to include American-style folk music, country music, and bluegrass.

The American West, however, was not exclusive in its hold over the tramp imagination. The men of the West were joined by sailors and pirates, Latin American peasants, Pacific Islanders, and tribal Africans. Cacti in one song could be followed by jungles in another; “Tramp Settlement Alaska” (*Trampská osada*, or *T. O., Aljaška*) might be visited by the denizens of “Tramp Settlement Hawai’i” (*T. O. Hawai*); protagonists might travel, in a single verse, from cosmopolitan metropolises to remote northern forests to Himalayan glaciers, then back to the dubious comforts of a European barroom floor. All this fit into a single project: in the words of tramp historian Bob Hurikán, “to bring the romantic into today’s age” (Hurikán 1990: 10).

The tramps’ romantic ideal (“*romantika*”), then, was an outward-looking romanticism. Like romantic nationalists, tramps felt ill at ease with the banality and cold rationalism of modern urban life; but they sought inspiration far away from home. This *distance*, more than anything else, gave coherence to a symbolism that was far removed from any concrete local reality—as tramps made even less effort than Hollywood or Karl May to faithfully portray the lives of the people and worlds they represented. A sheriff might preside over a camp of hoboes, playing Hawaiian guitar beneath a totem pole, without evoking any sense of inappropriateness among fellow tramps. On the contrary, the intense mixing of symbols suggests that the mixing itself was essential to the iconography’s effectiveness, as the combination of disparate parts served to evoke a diversity of imaginable adventures, maximally contrasting with the banality experienced in workaday life.

Within this diversity of images, nevertheless, the West occupied a privileged place. Images of cowboys, Indians, hoboes, and woodsmen far outnumbered images from the rest of the world, and notably absent were figures of the primitive and adventurous that could have been taken from Central or Eastern European tradition. Tramps favored the West in their imagery, but not from the prestigious, modernized West. They favored its most outcast, primitive, and wild elements.

The tramps’ evocations of the Wild West thus mirror and derive from Westerners’ own fascination with those uncivilized spaces whose conquest and civilizing provide the backdrop for Western modernity. Nevertheless, the tramp imagination

would be misunderstood if seen solely from this perspective. Although tramps would have been familiar with a long-standing discourse that presented Czech culture as a leading civilizing force in Eastern Europe—which thus implicitly justified Czech dominance over the multi-ethnic territory of Czechoslovakia and made Prague into a cultural center even for Slavs father to the east and south—tramps significantly chose *not* to fit their symbolism into this discourse. While cultural movements contemporary with tramping romanticized wandering Roma, Pagan Slavs, Hussite rebels, or Ruthenian bandits in the Eastern reaches of Czech hegemony, tramps chose figures that would not be associated with Czechness or the Czech-run state, and they explicitly rejected the national chauvinism that they saw in the Czech Scouts. They imagined spaces that they would never claim belonged to them or to their state, nation, or race. These were spaces that they could only claim by claiming their part in humanity as a whole, as fellow outcasts who together have rights to the whole. This variety of lumpenproletarian internationalism was not without its problems—among other things, it is worth considering whether tramps' position at the center of Europe made it easier for them to imagine *their* proletarianism as universal, while the outcasts of more marginal global regions were continually relegated in the public eye to the position of particular local cultures. But these were problems specific to the tramping movement, not derived *directly* from the colonial situation of the West.

Tramps' internationalism might be called abstract. It was based on an idealization of international others rather than on international communication or collaboration. Lacking personal contact with their others, tramps relied largely on stereotypes, many of them inaccurate and potentially offensive. It would be imprecise, however, to interpret this as an ordinary case of dehumanizing an oppressed other. Tramps envisioned themselves in solidarity with the people they represented—an attitude which, according to one tramp, “had deep roots in the soul of Czech people, who always sympathized with oppressed peoples and with Indian tribes fighting against the numerical superiority of ‘whites’” (Berka 1991: 99). But this solidarity remained a symbolic solidarity, whose symbolism was significant for the symbolizers rather than the symbolized (who could hardly be aware of the symbolizing).

The figures of the tramp imagination did not represent specific social groups and their social conditions but rather general principles relevant to tramps—adventure and romance, the primitive, the marginal, the distant. The principle of distance, in particular, influenced the meaning of all the other principles. The backwoodsman signified distance from the urban world. The pirate signified distance from the law. The hobo signified distance from labor. The West signified distance from the provincialism and familiarity of East-Central Europe. The Wild West signified distance from the civilized West. Setting out from their own, very modern forms of exclusion—the exclusion of exploited workers from bourgeois society, later supplemented by the exclusion of a general population from Party dictatorship—the tramps generalized the principle of exclusion and inverted the values attached to it. While the dissidents imbued their ideas of a “parallel polis” and a “civil society” with an aspiration for inclusion, the tramps turned the principle of exclusion into a principle of freedom from exclusive society.





## THE SOCIALITY OF (UN)CIVIL(IZED) SOCIETY

*And he who sits down by the fire of our primitive camp  
 May for the first time understand the heart of tramps.  
 A cup of bitter grog then rocks us off to sleep,  
 And in the morning we are waked by reddened skies' soft gleam.  
 The third verse of Tramps' Heart*

The tramps' hardy internationalism was, nevertheless, tempered by a kind of localism. Although tramps showed little interest in the human culture surrounding the physically places where they "went on the tramp," they showed great interest in these places as they were re-signified in the tramp imagination. Tramps combined an ideal of rootless wandering with an ideal of community rooted in the concrete sociality of tramping.

These competing ideals are expressed, for example, in the third verse of Včelička's "Tramps' Heart", which thematically shifts from "the wild distance" to "our primitive camp". The appeal of distant glaciers and forests is clear to anyone, but only "he who sits down with us" can truly understand what lies within tramps' hearts. *Us* now comes to the center of the song. Musicologist Josef Kotek has noted a parallel shift in the history of tramps' song repertoire, which in the movement's early years focused almost exclusively on adventure in foreign lands (with titles like "Sailor's Lullaby," "Venezuelána, adios [sic]," and "On the Zambezi River"), but which by the late 1920s began also to evoke tramps' own life, with lyrical descriptions of the surrounding countryside, of love for other tramps, of tramp settlements and tramps' wanderings (Kotek 1995: 177). In the postwar period this tendency grew still stronger, as evidenced in songs like "Our Gang" ("Naša parta"):

*When in our settlement the fire burns,  
 Immediately it draws people in with its shine [...]  
 Our group will never betray the mountains;  
 Every weekend we travel to the settlement [...]  
 Nothing bothers us there;  
 Nothing can get in the way of our freedom.<sup>11</sup>*

The song highlights the campfire's role as a ritual center for the community. It evokes nature, but "the mountains" in this song are neither those of an exotic land nor those of the nationalist symbolic landscape (for instance, no place names are given); they form a specifically *tramp* landscape, to which "our group," will remain faithful, because it is a group of friends who return, week after week, to the renew their claim on space.

Unlike the dissidents' civil society, which was assumed to be democratic more or less by default because it was free of structures of external domination, the society of

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<sup>11</sup> "Naša parta," by Alexander Kollárik / Bob from the "Utah" settlement in Slovakia. I have taken the text from *Kronika slovenských trampských osád*, an informally published CD-ROM distributed among Slovak tramps.



tramps was consciously constructed according to principles of internal egalitarianism. All tramps, regardless of age, were expected to address one another as “friend” (*kamarád*), using the familiar second-person singular (*ty*) and the familiar greeting “*ahoj!*”<sup>12</sup> The first issue of *Tramp* magazine asserted in 1929 that tramping grew out of a desire “to spit on leaders” (Morkes 1977: 55). Brčko, a tramp-historian from Slovakia, has called tramping “a movement that did not know national or other differences and was in every way democratic” (Brčko 1991: 49).

The value placed on internal democracy is also revealed by moments when internal democracy was called into question. The “sheriff,” for example, occupied an ambiguous position in tramp society, as a figure of authority elected by a group of friends who generally spurned authority. Although tramp literature does not frequently address the problem of sheriffs abusing their position, I raised the issue with veterans of the movement, and they explained to me that a variety of mechanisms were hold the sheriff’s power in check. The sheriff, for example, was not expected to wield legislative authority over the settlement but was charged with regular administrative responsibilities, while important decisions would be made by consensus or voting. In addition, the members of a settlement would often rotate in the role of sheriff. At other times, though, the sheriff would be the oldest or most respected member, and on at least one occasion the other members of the settlement had to resort to extraordinary measures in order to limit the sheriff’s power. According to Brčko, in the early 1970s a conflict broke out when an older tramp began to act “too leader-like” for the tastes of his younger fellows. The issue was eventually resolved, apparently in favor of the youths, in a “public tramp court” (whose functioning, unfortunately, Brčko’s book does not describe; Brčko 1991: 193).

These assertions of egalitarianism, moreover, were not made only by tramps themselves. It is noteworthy that the movement’s critics also emphasized and bemoaned tramping’s overly democratic character. In an anonymous 1931 pamphlet, for example, a “Socialist Scout” affiliated with the International Association of Socialist Woodcrafters (a radical left organization inspired, like the tramps, by the work of Ernest Thompson Seton) accused tramps of maintaining “an absolutely antiauthoritarian, *a priori* opposition to any discipline from above whatsoever,” when in fact “they very much need real leadership” (II. Tábornický kmen socialistických skautů 1931: 26). Meanwhile Antonín Svojsík, the conservative founder of official Czech Scouting, was especially annoyed at tramps’ democratic process: The tramp “sheriff,” he wrote, “might be a good person, but there is nothing requiring it, and the removal of unwanted sheriffs is right out of the school of demagogy” (Svojsík 1924; quoted in Waic, Kössl 1992: 39). Svojsík directed his indignation specifically at the following passage from the statutes of the “Bull’s Eye” (“*Býčí oko*”) Settlement:

The head of the settlement is the sheriff [...]. The sheriff is elected by 2/3 of the votes of the entire settlement [...]. If anyone is dissatisfied with the sheriff, he or

12 Still a relative neologism during the tramping movement’s infancy, the tramps themselves seem to have helped to popularize the greeting “*ahoj*,” which is now the most widely used in familiar greeting in the Czech and Slovak languages (See Rejzek 2015).



she must raise the complaint about the sheriff at a meeting, and the sheriff can be recalled by half of the votes of those present. (*Ibid.*)

In the postwar period, the Communist-run State Security likewise observed a lack of hierarchy in tramping, as shown in internal documents comparing the decentralized and interlocking network of tramping with the hierarchical structures of the Scouts (see Figure 1).

It remains, now, to follow how this imaginative structure and this organizational structure converged historically in a politically significant anti-politics.

## ANTI-POLITICS, ANTI-WORK

*Let us remain faithful to the working class. Together with it we will fight for our tramp demands [...] and for our tramp organization.*

From an announcement for a “National meeting” (Celostátní slezina) in *Tramp* magazine, Vol. III, no. 40 (December 3, 1931)

*Tramping is not just Sunday recreation. That would be a shallow goal indeed.*  
Bob Hurikán, in *The History of Tramping*, p. 11 (1990)

*[E]ven a movement as apolitical as tramping [...] cannot be cut off from a world which [...] was influenced by politics more than we would have liked [...].*

Břčko, in *The History of Tramping in Slovakia*, p. 212 (1991)

When the first tramps rose out of the rubble of World War I, they reacted not only to the horrors of war but also to the general malaise of industrial civilization that followed on the heels of the Czech Lands’ rapid prewar and postwar economic growth. Bob Hurikán, reflecting on his experience in the early days of the movement, wrote that “The banality of today’s life” demanded tramping, which was the “antithesis” of “weeklong work” (Hurikán 1990: 10). The later-day tramp Berka expanded on this, writing that “young people, literally poisoned by boring city life and the anxieties of factory work, longed for a healthy environment, for freedom, and they tried to flee from a society in which they found nothing that would give them pleasure [...]” (Berka 1991: 96) A similar view was taken by a tramp-columnist writing in the Communist newspaper *Rudý večerník* in the early 1930s: tramping had grown out of the rationalization of the Czech factory system following World War I (Cited in II. Tábornický kmen socialistických skautů 1931: 12–13).

According to the tramps’ own understanding of their history, the founders of the movement were industrial workers from Prague’s growing proletarian slums. It is difficult to judge how much this claim conformed to demographic reality and how much that reality might have been reinterpreted through a self-romanticization that denied or overlooked the middle-class roots of some participants.<sup>13</sup> And there can be

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13 Melinda Reidinger, for example, has emphasized the seemingly bourgeois cultural milieu of some tramps (see Reidinger 2007).



no doubt that once the movement attained mass popularity it attracted people from many walks of life. Yet in comparison with other back-to-nature movements, the tramping movement seems to have involved at the very least higher-than-average proportion of participants from the industrial working class. In the 1930s, even after all sources agree that many “middle-class” youths had entered the movement, tramps continued to develop a pugnacious working-class self-understanding that pitted them squarely against bourgeois elites, for whom they invented their own tramp term: *padouři*. The Communist and tramping movements increasingly shared the same members; tramp publications ridiculed the ruling classes, and Communist newspapers carried regular columns about tramping. Later an old Communist would reminisce on this period, in a book of oral history of the Czechoslovak Communist Party: “The tramping movement was no joke [...],” he said. “It was a reaction to the fascisization of life that was supported by the government of the day [...]. [M]any good comrades came out of the tramping movement” (Krutina 1971: 133). Early in 1931, 300 tramps approved a statement that came to be known as a “manifesto of political tramping,” which included the following theses:

1. Tramping is a social movement of working youth from the working and middle classes.
  2. It stems from the discontent of working youth with the current state of social organization, which serves the interests of private businessmen, known by tramps as *padouři*. These *padouři* rule in the state; they want to prohibit tramping and want to force young working people into pre-military service.
  3. We place the interests of working people, and especially youth, above the interests of *padour* bales of money [...].
  4. We reject any politics which does not have this as its single goal — the liberation of working people from the class rule of *padouři* [...].
- (Quoted in Waic, Kössl 1992: 47–8)

In April 1931 a conservative government made it clear that this class animosity was mutual when it passed a law that became infamous to tramps as the “Kubát Decree,” which prohibited unmarried men and women from sleeping in the same tents. Since Scouting organizations were segregated by gender and wealthy nature-lovers usually slept in cabins, the decree was widely recognized as a deliberate attack on tramping. Tramps responded with a demonstration in Prague attended by 10,000 to 15,000 protesters (Waic, Kössl 1992: 16), followed by further, ultimately successful mobilization against the decree. Tramp radicalism reached a second peak during the Spanish Civil War, when between 1000 and 3000 tramps combined their commitments to adventure and to revolution by joining the International Brigades (Mácha 1967: 94; Waic, Kössl 1992: 91).

The politicization of tramping, however, is only one side of the story. For one thing, “political tramping” could in many ways be understood as anti-political. At a time when nearly every political organization in Central Europe sponsored its own back-to-nature youth group, tramps refused to subordinate themselves to any higher authority. Moreover, their primary political activity was directed toward tramp so-



ciety itself—they struggled against the state while refusing to participate, as tramps, in traditional political structures (which one tramp described as little more than a screen for the ministers' and representatives' "soirées," "five-o'clocks," and "three-kings dinner parties"; Kuzma 1930; cited in Altman 2000: 225).

But even this relatively "political" tramping quickly met with a rival, self-consciously "apolitical" tendency within the movement. Apolitical tramps insisted on maintaining not only organizational autonomy but also the strictest separation between tramping and all kinds of traditional politics. Yet even "apolitical" tramps participated in public protests in defense of tramping. They also shared the proletarian identity of political tramps. So, for example, wrote Bob Hurikán, a staunch defender of "apolitical tramping," about tramps in Ostrava, one of the most polluted and industrialized parts of Czechoslovakia:

"Factories, ironworks, mines, shafts, reeking dumps, heavy air, musty apartments of the poor, luxurious villas. Overworked workers, misery, luxury, misery, misery, misery dances before one's eyes. When looking at this sad kaleidoscope [...], something grabs one's throat [...], and a person must ask oneself, "How is it possible to live in such a hell?" No answer comes, but a look into saddened eyes explains everything. In the distance, behind the gray curtain of suffocating smoke, shines the sun. [...] When I sat with the boys around the campfire [...] and listened to their stories, believe me, a chill went through me. This was the ready confession of people fighting with their fate and fighting for a piece of life—in the sun. At that moment I was proud that I, too, was a worker, because—I understood [...]" (Hurikán 1990: 10)

Some even saw apolitical tramping as *more* radical than political tramping: As one tramp put it, "Tramping is in fact kilometers ahead of socialism and communism, because while the latter two have ideals and slogans on paper, tramping has already for several years been realizing them in practice [...]" (Hadži 1930; cited in Altman 2000, 226) A similar view was taken by Fritz Beer,<sup>14</sup> an occasional tramp, who saw the movement's subversive potential precisely in its refusal to participate in ordinary politics:

"The tramping movement was something completely new: an apolitical youth revolt, an escape from toilsome work into romanticism, a typical Czech reaction to a harsh age. In Germany there were barricades and street battles, outraged young people marching in the Union of Red Front Fighters or in the SA. In Prague they turned up their noses at marching, because marching meant a kind of subordination. Tramps had but one goal: to stick their asses out at the world, at least for the weekend. And preferably naked. [...] The authorities didn't know what to do with them. When people railed indignantly and fought against them they knew what to do—that's what the police is for, after all. But that tens of thousands of young people made fun of them, ignored them, people who loyally paid their taxes but

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14 Brother of the prominent Communist journalist Kurt Konrad.

every weekend snubbed good bourgeois traditions—no government could stand that.” (Beer 2008: 104, 105)<sup>15</sup>

In November 1931, in the wake of the hated Kubát decree, political and apolitical tramps found enough common ground to release a public statement advancing the following shared demands:

1. Down with the prohibition on free tramping!
2. Down with pre-military training and required physical education for youth!
3. Free camping and cabin construction on common lands and state forests!
4. A discount on trains and state buses. Granting of passports without discrimination based on financial situation or political persuasion.
5. Extension of the same privileges to tramp settlements that are enjoyed by physical education organizations.
6. Removal of everything that takes free time away from youth. (Offering continuing education during working hours, introducing “English Saturdays” [i.e. Saturdays off work—JGF] for youth in stores and offices, etc.)
7. A six-hour working day for youth under 18 years of age without reduced wages. (Quoted in Waic, Kössl 1992: 59)

Each of these demands relates closely to tramping. But in them the demand for tramping takes on a radical character whose implications extend beyond the territory of tramping itself. Tramps showed no interest, as tramps, in taking state power or expropriating the means of production, but they worked to take control of their leisure and the means of adventure. Rather than organizing around their workplaces, tramps organized around their places of play. Rather than demanding shorter working hours, higher wages, and more worker control of the economy, tramps approached the problem of labor in reverse, demanding more and freer free time. “Political” tramps were more explicit in extending the logic of these particular demands into calls for general transformation, but apolitical tramps also called for extensive social change from their position outside traditional structures of state and party politics.

That being “apolitical” did not mean being indifferent to state power is well illustrated by the case of the “apolitical” Bob Hurikán: in 1939, after Nazi Germany annexed Bohemia and Moravia, Hurikán helped found a “Partisan Winter Brigade” of anti-fascist tramps. Hurikán unfortunately left no published record of how he conceptualized this activity, but it would have been consistent with the views of apolitical tramping if he called on tramps fight as tramps, outside politics, against a regime that threatened the interests of tramps and of all others who shared tramps’ troubles and desires.

In the postwar period, explicitly “political” tramping sharply declined, but the logic of tramp resistance did not disappear. In the face of Communist Party attempts

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15 This is my translation of the Czech translation of Beer’s text. I have not obtained the German original.



to integrate formally organized activity, and especially “political” activity, into state and Party-controlled structures, apolitical and semi-formal organization became a necessary precondition of autonomy. Tramps also shed much of their erstwhile proletarian self-understanding now that the ruling regime claimed to be ruled by the working class, and now that the working class was portrayed in the heroic of official culture, which was a far cry from the lumpen image that tramps took for themselves. A new generation of urban Czechs, and increasingly also Slovaks, from a wide array of social origins, revived the old label of “tramp” against the newly established picture of the “worker” as an obedient and diligent supporter of the new regime. Tramps maintained their scorn for boring civilized society, but the role formerly filled by the old bourgeoisie began to be filled instead by glum party elites and a content, sedentary middle class.

For most of this period, tramps’ oppositional activity was limited. Tramping provided organizational and symbolic space for symbolically undermining the values of the regime and for imagining more desirable alternative worlds. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, however, once again brought out apolitical tramps’ potential for anti-political engagement. In the months after the invasion, for example, the editors of *Tramp* magazine (which had renewed publishing, after a long hiatus, during the period of liberalization of early 1968) kept up a steady stream of protest, often stated subtly but easily understood by readers. Their boldest statement came in the January 1969 issue, whose cover depicted a series of unhappy situations for tramps, including a tank running over a totem pole. Beneath this the caption read “We wish you much tramp happiness in 1969!” Also during the 1968 invasion, Václav Havel witnessed how a group of “about a hundred” tramps, who had previously been the “scourge” of the town of Liberec, provisionally mobilized their anti-political organization to defend socialism with a human face against an occupying army:

Shortly after the invasion, [the tramp sheriff] Pastor showed up at the chairman’s office in the town hall and said, “I’m at your disposal, chief.” [...] [F]or two days members of Pastor’s gang wore armbands of the auxiliary guard, and three-man patrols walked through the town: a uniformed policeman in the middle with two long-haired tramps in jeans on either side (Havel and Hviždala 1990: 108).

Within a short period of time, however, overt resistance became difficult again, and tramping retreated to the margins of formal politics.

It was nevertheless precisely during the subsequent conservative years that tramping experienced its greatest popularity. Tramps’ refusal of the state’s political logic enabled tramping to become a mass movement for those who, as Slovak tramp Brčko put it, “fled from the cities into nature not only before an ultra-technologized [pretechnizovaný] world, but also before an ultra-politicized [prepolitizovaný] one” (Brčko 1991: 14). Tramping offered an alternative to many forms of officially sanctioned leisure, at a time when state sponsorship came with the presumption of implicit support for state policy. But tramping also provided an alternative to more individualistic and family-oriented leisure activities, which were likewise promoted in this period by the state, which, according to one interpretation, preferred to keep its subjects atomized and self-satisfied rather than encouraging the rebellious collectivity of tramping (Bren 2002).

It was moreover during this period that the tramping movement helped give birth to another semi-autonomous cultural movement, which eventually spread its influence beyond the sphere of tramping, and which is widely considered to have played a key role in fomenting opposition to the regime. This was a folk singer-songwriter movement, many of whose leading performers came out of the tramping movement and who, through tramp music, found their way to such critical North American folk-singers as Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan. The Czech and Slovak folk song movement rivaled the dissident movement in importance and certainly eclipsed it in numerical participation, engaging a broad public of urban youths in large festivals and concerts, and popularizing a large number of socially critical songs that would, in the course of the 1970s and 80s, be heard around campfires and other social gatherings across Czechoslovakia. This movement's songs, much more than the literary and artistic works of the dissidents, were well known and widely recalled by the masses of demonstrators in 1989. Singer-songwriter Karel Kryl who, from his position of exile in Germany, rivaled Václav Havel as one of Czechoslovakia's most influential oppositional figure, is said to have spent time among tramps (who called him "Kájus") before he fled the country in 1969 (Kriss 2004). Significantly, many folk singer-songwriters came from the industrial working class,<sup>16</sup> and although they did not usually adopt explicitly proletarian attitudes, they consistently presented themselves with a plebeian, everyman imagery that drew heavily on the social-semiotic constructions of tramping.



## POLITICS IN THE DISTANCE

*I know, you accursed distance, and you must know it too,  
 You dazzle the eyes only, and you break the heart in two.  
 And when somewhere a fire burns, a flame in quiet night,  
 I will remember our old settlement for one last time.  
 The fourth and final verse of *Tramps' Heart**

In the aftermath of 1989, it was dissident and post-dissident civil society, rather than the uncivilized society of tramping and movements related to it, that provided a hegemonic ideology for the founding of a new democracy. The concept of civil society was used to strengthen a specific and limited ideal of citizenship, in which intellectual elites formed a civilized, moral vanguard against the perceived dangers of demagoguery. This model, which was only implicit in dissident theory, took an increasingly central and explicit place in emerging liberal-conservative, anti-populist ideologies, which valorized the rule of elites and delegitimized various modes of public engagement that were deemed uncivil. In contrast to the dissidents' ideal of responsible citizenry, tramping expressed ideals that had been historically denied civility and citizenship. And while civil society was oriented toward state politics, albeit from the perspective of citizens participating in government from the outside, tramping pos-

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16 See e.g. the list of singers origins and occupations in Plachetka (1991).



ited a solidarity between non-citizens and partial citizens who had limited access to civic participation. Tramping, however implicitly, raised the possibility of an alternative mode of public engagement, in which the boundaries of the civil and civilized would be questioned, and in which voice would be given to that which is excluded from the society of the civic.

“The wild distance made us drunk [...]” The “accursed distance [...] dazzle[s] the eyes [...] but break[s] the heart.” The fantasy of tramping appeared painfully unreachable; yet it was repeatedly reached in the community around the campfire. The fantasy of tramping was unreachable, but the possibility of imagining it was conditioned by the equal unreachability of the joys of modern life. The anti-politics of tramping lay in the articulation of these two unreachable distances—the promised happiness of bourgeois and Western civilization, and the wild adventure of the uncivilized—through the reachability of tramp practice. Like other anti-political movements, tramping involved a fundamental rejection of dominant modes of state and party politics, which were always already distant from tramps, who did not have a place in them to express and press for their desires. Parties and the Party claimed to represent them, but these representations did not correspond to the tramps’ experience of alienation from the ideals that civilized society posed.

At the same time, however, tramping involved a second mode of distant politics, a second politics of representation. In tramp fantasy, political principles played themselves out in a parallel world of representations, where the subjects and objects of tramp desire were brought together, given a symbolic solidarity of proximity. Against a representativeness of substitution, in which political representation makes citizens disappear as active subjects, the tramps posed a representativeness of desire, in which desired things were assembled on a plane beyond power politics. The representers were not placed politically above the represented; nor were the represented given power through or over the representations of them. Representations were, rather, mixed in a field of political indifferentiation. Power struggles, to be sure, could be represented on this plane (Indians against colonial armies, hoboes against upstanding citizens), but the meaning of these struggles was translated into a unified message of abstract solidarity—not so much with these particular struggles as with the principle of distantiation from dominant politics—and into a message of abstract desire—not so much for these particular people or lives as for freedom from boring and oppressive society, which opened space for further particular desires.

These two distances—from rejected politics and from differently politicized objects of desire—were then grounded in the nearness of the tramp community. It was the form of this community that determined the form of tramp anti-politics, positioning the movement against existing political entities, articulating its desires as shared demands, and showing that even the wildest imagination is socially *organized*. It was this communal organization that could hold up its imagined world as a criticism of actually existing society, calling for a liberation of leisure from labor, and channeling shared desires for systemic transformation. Tramps’ organization, moreover, offers further evidence that the fragmented and precarious margins of society can organize themselves at all, finding that elusive element of the “common” that has

lately been championed in radical politics (e.g. Hardt, Negri 2004; Raunig 2002) but has been less adequately explained.

While many of today's anti-political thinkers favor deterritorialization and the de-structuring of stable social forms, the tramping movement met the process deterritorialization (from national space) with a dual reterritorialization: of the spaces of fantasy and of the re-christened spaces of tramp practice. Like in the post-structuralist and autonomist tradition, the moment of deterritorialization is ambivalently embraced as both a condition of social exclusion and as a principle of autonomy. But the tramping movement would reappropriate the territories opened by its conditional banishment from the civilized world. The wild distance would be overlaid by a familiarized territory of desire: a home for those who have no home, a society of the uncivilized.





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