



# How Not to Prepare Majales: A Meaning-Centred Analysis of Subversive Student Performances in Communist Czechoslovakia

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**ABSTRACT** This study offers a sociological analysis of a student carnival in communist Czechoslovakia, the Majales in Bratislava and Prague in May 1956. Utilizing sources such as newspaper articles, photographs and witness accounts, this case study aims to reconstruct the conditions, meanings and consequences of Majales, employing a theoretical framework that highlights processes of communication between centre and periphery. It is argued that the Majales were facilitated by a destabilization of the symbolic centre, triggered by Stalin's death in March 1953 and Khrushchev's speech in February 1956. This set the stage for the students, who criticized the centre with subversive performances and playful demonstrations of dissatisfaction. Finally, the initial reception of the performances in the official media and the efforts of the state apparatus to control the meanings of Majales are discussed.

**KEY WORDS** Stalinism, carnival, cultural sociology, hermeneutics, 1956

## Introduction

The year 1956 marked a turning point in the political, cultural and social history of Central and Eastern Europe. After Stalin's death in 1953, a cultural thaw was already on the way, but it was only in 1956 that "de-Stalinization" fully took off. In this new situation, various social groups began to publicly voice their feeling of disillusionment with the political system of state socialism. The first major protest since the Pilsen and East German uprisings of 1953 was organized in Poznań in June 1956, but violently suppressed by armed forces, leaving dozens dead and hundreds wounded. At the end of October 1956, student gatherings in Budapest developed into a fully-fledged revolution that was quelled by the Soviet Army. The audacious attempts of Polish and Hungarian protesters seemed to have had no counterpart in neighbouring Czechoslovakia, at that time known as a fortress of Stalinism (cf. Skilling 1977: 257). Unlike in Poland and Hungary, there was no violent uprising in Czechoslovakia in 1956. This does not mean, however, that the country was unaffected by the political climate

change. This article investigates a specific instance of public criticism in Czechoslovakia – the Majales in May 1956.

Majales are traditional student May celebrations, characterized by a carnivalesque ethos and subversive prankishness. In the second half of the 19th century, Majales emerged as a manifestation of the nationalist sentiments among Czech students. The tradition declined during the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1939), but was revived by the communists after World War II. Majales were organized by the communist youth until the coup d'état in February 1948, after which they were prohibited (Pernes 2008: 141). It was not until 1956 that once again Majales celebrations were held in Bratislava (May 12) and Prague (May 20). A newsletter from Bratislava's Comenius University *Naša Univerzita* suggests that the idea to revive Majales came “from above” (10 May, 1956: 1), likely from the central organs of the state-controlled *Czechoslovak Youth Union* (Československý svaz mládeže – ČSM). Although the students were allowed to create their own placards and wagons, the student union tried to control the events by publishing guidelines in university newspapers as well as a brochure titled *Ako pripraviť majáles* [How to prepare Majales] (1956).

However, when the Majales crowd assembled in Bratislava, it seemed that many of the students had read altogether different literature. A group of students, dressed in lugubrious costumes, carried a coffin titled “Academic Freedom”, which they later threw into the Danube; others satirized Soviet architecture, the political situation and the declining quality of student life. A week later, the Prague Majales, which attracted approximately one hundred thousand onlookers (Petraš 2015: 243), featured even more subversive performances, including a young woman in chains, again representing “Academic Freedom”, pushed around by jailers. The students of the Theological Faculty carried a shelf of “libri prohibiti” (Blaive 2001, non-paginated photograph), while a girl in a Pioneers uniform handed out copies of the Party's history instead. Political slogans and farcical allegories were omnipresent, as was the secret police, which allegedly arrested people right on the spot (Matthews 1998: 31). Their presence was not left uncommented by students who were shouting: “Nebojte se, i policie jde s náma!” [“Fear not, even the police are with us!”] (Gruson 1956).

Despite being formally organized by the ČSM, hundreds of students entertained tens of thousands of onlookers with parodies and commentaries on the shortcomings of the Communist system. The Majales in 1956 became a significant event that attracted considerable public attention: “For the last two days, nobody in Bratislava has spoken about anything but the carnival parade. In the tram, on the street, the word is everywhere”, reported Ladislav Švihran for the newspaper *Smena* (1956). Why did the participants, all of a sudden, choose to criticize the Communist regime, and what cultural resources did they use to do so? And how did the state-controlled media and the political apparatus respond to this challenge?

## Methodology and theoretical framework

This study of the Czechoslovak Majales in 1956 follows the principles of the “strong program in cultural sociology” (Alexander and Smith 2003) highlighting the importance of *meanings* and *culture* for social processes. We believe that a meaning-centred analysis of the Majales will shed light on similar subversive acts in the context of the Communist regime

in Czechoslovakia and, more generally, the Eastern Bloc. Protest events, like the Majales and the Velvet Revolution, are not triggered by economic conditions or the sheer lack of political freedom, but by shared meanings and cultural processes (cf. Alexander 2011). Drawing on Edward Shils (1961), we analyse the communicative dynamics in Czechoslovakia and the Eastern Bloc as interplay between *centre* and *periphery* of both symbolic and institutional structures. We show how a destabilized centre can engender performances in the periphery and how these performances are in turn interpreted by the centre and re-integrated in the central cultural system.

### Historical ethnography

This study employs various types of data, including newspaper articles, photographs and witness accounts, to reconstruct the meanings of Majales. The findings of the only comprehensive study on the topic so far (Matthews 1998), which not only includes a minute description of the events but also several errors, are corroborated, corrected and supplemented using the memoirs of participants (in Blaha 2007) as well as photographs documenting the events (Blaise 2001; Blaha 2007). Additional information on banners, slogans and performances were found in the digitalized archive of the Open Society Fund, including two interviews from 1956, conducted in Germany, with émigré eyewitnesses of the events (Interview 1; Interview 2) as well as two reports based on undercover interviews conducted with Czechoslovak citizens abroad (Report 1; Report 2). Whereas the interviews with the political refugees might have overemphasized the political dimension of Majales, the reports were likely distorted by the self-censorship of Czechoslovak citizens abroad. Both types of accounts of the Majales therefore had to be corroborated by other sources.

Our approach to the Majales parades was inspired by the *historical ethnography* of Andreas Glaeser, who criticizes ethnographers' "fixation on the immediate spatial, temporal, and social context" (2010: 55) and proposes to reconstruct historical events on the basis of archival materials and interviews. We engage in a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the events, focussing on their public meanings and cultural patterns. Although this is a meaning-centred analysis, we do not disregard political or economic factors, but simply insist that culture and meanings should be treated as "relatively independent" (Alexander and Smith 2003: 12).

### Centre and periphery

After the coup d'état in February 1948, communists took over the Czechoslovak state institutions and effectively gained control of what Elaine Chan calls the "structural centre of society", which "makes policy decisions, runs the daily operation of the administration, maintains law and order, and has monopoly over the use of force in society" (1999: 339). Alongside the institutional take-over, communists took control of the public sphere in order to erase any interpretation at odds with the officially sanctioned understanding of reality. In other words, the Communist Party tried to occupy the "symbolic centre" of Czechoslovak society, understood as a "set of values, beliefs, myths, symbols, rituals, festivals and memories" (Chan

1999: 339). Edward Shils spoke of “the central value system” as “the centre of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs which governs the society” (1961: 117). The farther we move from the centre of a society to “the hinterland or the periphery, over which authority is exercised, attachment to the central value system becomes attenuated” (Ibid.: 123).

In his analysis of discursive transformations, Jacques Derrida argues that meaning systems are inherently unstable. At times, when the symbolic centre becomes “dislocated”, it loses its legitimacy and can no longer “orient, balance, and organize the structure” or “limit what we might call the play of the structure” (2002: 352). This corresponds to an observation made by Shils, who argued that the authority of the centre diminishes once it loses its connection to the sacred collective representations of a society (1961: 118). Once the symbolic centre is destabilized, the associated institutional structure loses its legitimacy too. If it is no longer able to control the flow of meanings in a society, free play – cultural appropriation, combination and permutation – ensues and may result in the creation of a supplementary sign replacing the former centre (Derrida 2002: 365). In other words, social order is suspended by “anti-structure” as the society enters a “liminal phase” (cf. Turner 1980), a stage of in-between-ness characterized by deep-seated ambiguity and high levels of anxiety (Szakolczai 2009). Liminal situations are often accompanied by an unusual upswing of creativity with transformative potential (Szakolczai 2009: 160). Nevertheless, it mustn’t be forgotten that in real-world politics there is also the central institutional power structure which can arrest much more than the “play of substitutions” (Derrida 2002: 365) and employ brute force to reinstate its control, as happened in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

### Social performance

Drawing on the works of John Austin, Erving Goffman and Kenneth Burke, Jeffrey Alexander developed a theory of *performance* as the “social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (2006: 32). He identifies six elements of social performance, which to be successful performances must re-fuse (Ibid.: 33–36). *Collective representations* connect social performances to the cultural system and thus to the symbolic centre of a society. They can be further distinguished into *background symbols*, usually associated with the centre, and *foreground scripts*, translating symbols into directives for action, the staging of the performance as *mise-en-scène*. Regarding the flow of communication, it can be argued that the performing *actor* represents the centre and the *audience* the periphery of the performance. Actors can either draw on a set of symbols associated with the centre, employ alternative symbols, or play subversively with the central meanings. Subversive readings on the side of the audience are also possible. The situation of actors who promulgate central values differs considerably from those attacking central values, not the least thanks to their privileged access to *means of symbolic production* and *social power*.

As observed by Émile Durkheim (2008), and echoed in Shils’s and Young’s essay on the coronation of Queen Elizabeth (1953), public rituals and social performances are crucial for maintaining people’s attachment to the central value system. Ritual performances

permeated everyday life in Communist countries – from conspicuous May workers' parades to repeated displays of the Soviet flag, and it was through them that the centre could exert control over the periphery. Although the majority of rituals were labelled “spontaneous”, they were, in fact, organized by the institutional centre, with participation often being compulsory. Reaching far into society, the central apparatus controlled and distributed the means of symbolic production and used its social power to approve, criticize and censor public statements.

At the periphery, where “the play of structure” (Derrida 2002) is more pronounced, especially in liminal times when the grip of the centre weakens, social performances take different shapes. During Czechoslovak Communism, counter-performances promoting different sets of meanings were usually hidden from the public – and the eyes of the secret police. In comparison, subversive performances, which ironically played with central meanings, could entertain a higher publicity. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) described medieval folk culture as a peripheral counter culture, subverting as well as supplementing the central culture of elites through its grotesque imagery. A performative expression of this folk culture is the carnival, in which a fictive counter-world is created and enacted. We believe that the Majales 1956 can be understood as such a *carnivalesque* performance.

### Destabilization of the centre: the two deaths of Stalin

How could the Majales emerge in a state of “total occupation of public semantic space” (Možný 1991: 27)? Shils would probably have suggested that students, a group that has a high proportion of “alertly intelligent” actors who feel at the same time distanced from and concerned with the centre, are structurally prone to protests (1961: 126). Indeed, students tend to occupy a “liminal” position at the periphery of society (cf. Turner 1980). Although most students are legally adults, they do not hold yet positions of power in the institutional order and are thus not regarded as “full” members of a society. Students occupy a transitory position, between children and grown-ups, which structurally relieves them from the duties of adult life and provides them with time and space to devise and engage in projects like Majales, while culturally there is a certain tolerance or even expectation of deviant student behaviour. Nevertheless, the liminality of the student status does not explain why events like Majales emerge at any given time and place. Moreover, from a cultural sociological point of view, such an explanatory strategy amounts to a reduction of culture to social structure (Alexander and Smith 2003). Even more importantly, it gives no answer to the question: Why did the Majales happen in this form at this specific moment in time? In reconstructing the social and cultural conditions under which the Majales 1956 took place, we have to turn our attention from peripheral Czechoslovakia to the institutional and symbolic centre of international communism, the Soviet Union.

#### Stalinism as political religion

Soviet-style communism, and Stalinism in particular, was a religion-like system permeating the everyday life of citizens: some of them true believers, more following acquiescently and

a few being heretics. Especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the symbolic centre in many Eastern European countries can adequately be described as “political religion”, a term coined by Eric Voegelin (2000). Voegelin argued that the modern process of secularization did not change the “political-religious symbolism”, but merely substituted the transcendent God with “contents of the world” (2000: 60). God did not simply disappear, but was symbolically decapitated (Ibid.: 64), which is particularly true for the militant atheism of communism.

It is usually a political leader who replaces God as the symbolic centre of society in the cultural systems of political religions. In the post-war Soviet and Eastern European context, this role was assumed, of course, by Joseph Stalin. Stalin’s symbolic influence was immense already in the days of World War II – as Pavel Kohout confessed, “Stalin’s name was often the only beam of light in the darkness” (1956). After the war, Stalin was portrayed as saviour of the Soviet Union and Europe, which was used to legitimize the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. According to an early heretic Egon Bondy, the “enthusiasm for Stalinism, predominantly among youngsters, was massive” (2008: 63). Cultural representations of Stalin were characterized by superhuman powers and extraordinary commitment, by veracity, intellectual farsightedness and love for humanity. The representation of peripheral leaders such as Klement Gottwald in Czechoslovakia followed the same pattern: like Stalin, Gottwald was reputed to know all the workers by name (Macura 2008: 105) and to sacrifice his own rest to watch over the sleep of the Czechoslovak nation (Ibid.: 114).

In *The Two King’s Bodies*, Ernst Kantorowicz (1957) discusses the medieval distinction between the mortal body of the king and the enduring body politic, highlighting the fact that the death of a ruler is a critical event – a problem that medieval political theology addressed with the conception of a continuous body politic. A similar problem exists in modern political religions, where the death of a leader is potentially destabilizing. The mummification of Lenin, Stalin, as well as Gottwald, can be reconstructed as attempts to preserve the mortal body of the deceased ruler to symbolize the continuous existence of the Soviet body politic. Due to his unprecedented centrality in the Soviet cultural system, the physical death of Josef Stalin triggered a process of cultural destabilization, whose shockwaves were felt at the periphery. It is no accident that proletarian riots in Czechoslovakia and East Germany took place in 1953, right after Stalin’s death.

#### Khrushchev’s speech and its consequences

Stalin was, however, kept alive symbolically (Macura 2008). Although the idolatry waned in the months following his death, he remained a strong element in the visual and textual canon of the communist authorities. After all, Stalin’s megalomaniac monument was built on Letná hill in Prague as late as 1955. Although the gradual decomposition of Stalinism began already in 1953, its collapse is marked by the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where Nikita Khrushchev gave his famous speech “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences” on February 25, 1956.

With surprising frankness, Khrushchev (1956) described Stalin as an unscrupulous mass murderer who, with the complicity of “Beria’s gang”, terrorized and executed



millions of his countrymen including, importantly, good communists. Khrushchev, lacking the symbolic authority to castigate the idolized leader, called upon the only two figures above Stalin in the communist Parthenon – Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx. The juxtaposition with Lenin served to highlight Stalin’s intellectual and moral shortcomings, while Marx, who gave early warnings of the “cult of personality”, was invoked to discredit Stalin as a communist and as a leader. Finally, Khrushchev attacked the myth of Stalin as a military genius, central to his legitimacy in the domination of Eastern Europe, arguing that his military incompetence led to the economic devastation of the USSR and a high wartime death toll. Khrushchev’s iconoclastic speech was a symbolic decapitation of Stalin as the central figure of the communist cultural system. Furthermore, with Stalin being portrayed as madman, the communist system itself was exculpated for decades of terror (cf. Kołakowski 1981).

Khrushchev was certainly not the first to criticize the “cult of personality” (cf. Kołakowski 1981: 450), but he was among the few capable of delivering a powerful performance. At least partially, “the authority in the language comes from the outside” (Bourdieu 1991: 109), the institutional position of the speaker. As General Secretary of the Party, Khrushchev could castigate the beloved Stalin and thus to recode the central symbolic system. And even more, he succeeded in delivering an authentic performance, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, for example, saw in it a “genuine movement of heart” (cited in Kramer 2008: 71). Despite the fact that Khrushchev’s “secret speech” was performed for an audience of trusted delegates, never broadcasted and only published in 1989, its talking points spread quickly around the Eastern Bloc, as well as the whole world (Blaive 2001: 70–83). In the following weeks, news of the symbolic coup d’état in the centre reached the peripheral countries of the Eastern Bloc.

Khrushchev’s speech attacked Stalinism, which was still the dominant political religion, particularly in Czechoslovakia, where show trials took place even after Stalin’s death. We know that members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party were familiarized with the speech on April 10 (Petráň 2015: 232). After that, elements of the speech appeared in the press and new signifiers started to emerge in the discourse. This cultural transformation became evident during the 2nd Congress of Czechoslovak Writers (April 22–29, 1956), where several speeches echoed Khrushchev’s critique of Stalin. The expression “cult of personality” was widely used, although it seldom referred to Stalin directly. It was mostly employed to delegitimize particular literary strategies (e.g. the idealization of a single proletarian figure) or to criticize the general organization of society. “Cult of personality” became a symbolically polluted signifier with shifting meanings that quickly entered the public repertoire of criticism. During the Congress, covered by the official media, writers like František Hrubín, Vítězslav Nezval and Jaroslav Seifert cautiously addressed the regime, demanding abolishment of censorship and freedom for jailed authors. Khrushchev’s performance, as it turned out in the end, had serious unintended consequences – it threatened the legitimacy of the communist system as a whole.

## Majales as carnivalesque performance and semiological guerrilla

When the shockwaves of Khrushchev's speech hit Czechoslovakia, students were already protesting against a new law issued by the Minister of National Defence, which forced university graduates to enlist for the standard two-year military service. The protests started on the evening of January 17, when students in Bratislava dormitories spontaneously gathered and sung, in pyjamas, an improvised protest song (Marušiak 2007: 17). The student movement gained traction in the following months, and by the time of the 2nd Congress of Czechoslovak Writers, students around the country held public meetings and drafted "resolutions" criticizing censorship, the estrangement of political elites and their nation's mimicking of the Soviet Union. Initially, the Ministry of Education was inclined to recognize the student resolutions as legitimate (Marušiak 2007: 20), but the party leadership insisted that they should be regarded as bourgeois anti-establishment provocation (Ibid.: 21).

In this political and cultural climate, the state-controlled Czechoslovak Youth Union organized the first Majales since 1948. As a whole, the 1956 Majales parades in Bratislava and Prague were quite heterogeneous. Aside from salient political satire, hundreds of participants came in costumes referring to their field of study, while others paid tribute to the authority of the structural and symbolic centre, for example law students from Charles University carrying the banner: "Děkujeme dělnické třídě, že nám umožnila studovat!" ["We thank the working class for an opportunity to attend the university!"] (Matthews 1998: 30). It is reported that the audience burst out laughing upon reading the banner. In times of cultural crisis, such a flagrant expression of belief in the centre seemed grotesque. Although not all participants engaged in political protest, a significant number did. The Majales might have been less provocative than many onlookers and participants expected (Gruson 1956; Holler 1956; Matthews 1998), but they contained nevertheless dozens of individual performances that subversively thematized life in communist Czechoslovakia.

### Historical allegories and references

As pointed out by Durkheim (2008), social groups and societies have their own understanding of time. They have their "beginnings", zeniths and nadirs that create a "frame of reference" (Merton and Sorokin 1937: 623) which allows actors to understand their own place in the world. Textual or visual references to history were among the most common tropes at the Majales parades. Some were harmless, such as folk costumes signifying an indefinite national past. However, many referred to more specific pasts, real or imagined, offering an unfavourable juxtaposition of the Communist regime with different historical epochs.

Even *prehistory* appeared as a trope in the Prague parade, represented by two groups of students costumed as cave-dwellers. According to the newspaper *Mladá Fronta* (May 22, 1956: 1) the first group carried a banner demanding "K vyšší užítkovosti mamutů!" ["Towards higher productivity of Mammoths!"]. The second group carried a large model of a dinosaur (Matthews 1998: 28). On its side was written: "Jsem nezranitelný. Mám kůži minist. školství!" ["I am invulnerable. I have Minist. of Education's skin!"] (Blaise 2001, nonpaginated photograph), which by its abbreviation referred to both, the minister and the ministry. Its opposite side read: "Pro studentskou mense" ["For student cafeteria"]



(Matthews 1998: 28). Although prehistory did not belong to the eras that were normatively coded in the communist discourse, both scenes carried a political message. The trope of prehistory not only portrayed the existing communism as underdeveloped, but also problematized the very idea of historical progress, which was central to the communist cultural system. Finally, the comment on the “skin” of the Ministry of Education addressed the perceived intransigence and insularity of the state apparatus.

At least two salient performances in Prague thematized the *Medieval Age*. An executioner with an axe was accompanied by several students carrying a large wooden block with a depiction of human head and a banner reading: “Neposlouchal” [“He did not obey”] (Report 1). The figure of the executioner pointed to the contradiction between the self-representation of the state apparatus as modern and progressive and the actual practices it employed to discipline the periphery. The term “neposlouchal”, moreover, refers to a situation where children break the rules set by an adult authority. As such, the scene symbolized the regime’s infantilization of the students, as well as the draconian punishment for trivial deviances from the norm. The second performance featured a group of students dressed as monks (Matthews 1998: 27), carrying a sign: “Vzhůru k novým vzdělávacím metodám!” [“Towards new educational methods!”] (Blaive 2001, non-paginated photograph). Here, the contemporary educational system was likened to the Dark Ages. The effect of the allegory was created by the tension between the declarative wish to improve the education system and the historicizing visuals. The new educational reform was presented as already outdated and based on obsolete ideological schemes that could just as well have come from the Dark Ages. As one of the student-monks said, “we had had about four serious educational reforms in less than eight years, and people were bored with it” (cited in Matthews 1998: 28).

An unfavourable juxtaposition with the *Age of Enlightenment* was implied with a banner in Prague criticizing the backwardness of the educational policies of the communist regime: “Co Komenský vytvořil, to Kahuda zničil” [“What Comenius created, Kahuda destroyed”] (Report 1). The new reform of the Ministry of Education (led by František Kahuda) was portrayed as violating the principles of John Amos Comenius, an Enlightenment scholar well known for his advocacy of non-restrictive and creative education. The students claimed that the current education policy was not able to reach the standards set three hundred years earlier.

Finally, there were references to *capitalist modernity*, the constitutive Other of the communist cultural system. In Czechoslovak media, capitalist societies were portrayed as haunted by poverty and lack of solidarity, which was contrasted with the alleged camaraderie and abundance of socialism. While in socialism the people were free, in capitalism they were slaves. The theme of slavery was picked up by students in Bratislava, who, stylized as serfs, pulled an old steam-engine car with ropes. On its side hung a banner that read “Cvičná jazda ministerstva školstva!” [“Ministry of Education’s driving lesson!”] (Interview 1). The vehicle’s vintage design juxtaposed the practices of the Ministry of Education and the enslavement of the proletariat in factories. The combination of the term “driving lesson” and the old car suggested, again, the regime’s lack of flexibility. The enslaved students had to pull the Ministry of Education and progress, not thanks to, but in spite of the official

institutions. The subversive message of the historical allegories at Majales can be summed up by a socialist joke according to which “existing socialism” is a dialectical synthesis of history: “from the prehistoric classless society it took primitivism, from antiquity slave labor, from medieval feudalism ruthless domination, from capitalism exploitation ‘and from socialism a name’” (cited in Žižek 2014).

#### Lived experience and official discourse

Whereas the historical allegories used images of an imagined past to illuminate the present, other performances contrasted the lived historical experience with the distorted historiography of the communist regime. Often, students alluded to events in the recent past, which they had or could have witnessed themselves. For example, several students in Bratislava decided to recall the darker side of the Soviet liberation by walking in two parallel columns – one dressed in Red Army uniforms, the others as demonized US servicemen. Whereas the Americans marched calmly with guns in their hands, the Soviets acted drunk and shouted: “Eau-de-Cologne – vodka! Pitralon – vodka!”<sup>1</sup> (Matthews 1998: 22). This performance problematized the official representations of Soviets and Americans, the former being portrayed as drunkards who intoxicate themselves with aftershave and the latter appearing sober and ready to strike. While such portrayal was clearly at odds with the central system of collective representations, it surely resonated with the audience, many of whom had witnessed drunken Red Army personnel in the streets of Bratislava a decade earlier. The allegory was also a synecdoche, the soldiers standing for the respective powers blocks and begging the question: Why have we pledged allegiance to the side that is worse off? Such a critical stance towards the Soviet Union became widespread among students in 1956 and many student resolutions in the months preceding Majales contained the demand to remove symbols of the USSR from public spaces (see Matthews 1998: 41).

The Stalinist show trials were also thematized in several performances. “Pán Karnevalista” [“Mr. Carnival”], a student dressed in bear pelt, and “Prokurátor Grandpapulós” [“Attorney General Big Mouth”] engaged in “show” trials against those who refused to take part in the preparation of the Majales or obstructed the process (Marušiak 2007: 23). It was a grotesque portrayal of the gruesome show trials, which just had begun to surface in the official media. A group in Prague carried a banner asking the following questions: “Co je lepší? Popravit malé zločince a nechat ty velké na svobodě? Nebo popravit ty velké a nechat malé, aby je nahradili?” [“What is better? To execute small criminals and let the big ones go free? Or execute the big ones and let the small ones take their place?”] (Matthews 1998: 30). While enigmatic, it clearly referenced the show trials. However, in contrast to Khrushchev, the students did not say that the executed were innocent but rather implied that nobody in the political apparatus was. Either the executed were criminal kingpins and those who were in charge now were only small criminals or it was the other way around.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pitralon* was a popular Czechoslovak aftershave.

Another banner in Prague, “My studenti jsme sice mladí, ale dost si pamatujeme” [“We, students, might be young but we remember a lot”], was a performative commentary on the Orwellian practice of the central political apparatus to manipulate the representation of the past for the sake of ideological consistency. Despite their youth, the students claimed to see through the regime’s attempts at manipulating the recent past. A similar point was made by students carrying a cage, which was signed “Na indexu” [“On the index”] (Blaive 2001: non-paginated photograph) and accompanied by a girl handing out copies of the Party’s history. Finally, a peculiar reference to the recent past was a banner reading: “Nebojte se Pražáci, ještě jsou tu štuďáci!” [“Fear not, people of Prague – the students are still with you!”]. The official media were particularly unhappy with this one – “Is there anything the people of Prague fear?” asked Josef Holler in *Mladá Fronta* (1956). Interestingly, the slogan was a performative time machine: a banner with exactly the same text was carried in the last Prague Majales in 1948 in support of the Communist Party. While the banner expressed continuity with the protest tradition, its meaning had changed dramatically. It implied that there was still something to be afraid of – the central state apparatus, from which the students had broken free, at least in their performance.

Concerns about the freedom of the press were expressed by a group of Prague students, who, each in black and with keys in their mouths, carried a banner “Jsme redaktoři Mladé fronty!” [“We are the editors of Mladá Fronta!”] (Interview 1). The feeling that the reality represented in the media, not only historical but also contemporary, was not genuine and that information was being manipulated was voiced also in the chant “Každé malé dítě ví, co Mladá fronta nepoví!” [“Every kid knows what Mladá fronta would never say!”] and the banner “Mladá fronto 1956: kde jsou naše resoluce?” [“Mladá fronta 1956: Where are our resolutions?”] (Blaive 2001, non-paginated photograph). Scenes and banners addressing the recent past and the present situation were predominantly based on the implicit contradiction between lived experience and official discourse as promulgated by the communist party.

#### Subversive performances as semiological guerrilla

The humour of performances was often produced by a subversion of the official language. The students developed two major strategies for such subversion. One was purely textual, the other was achieved through a combination of textual and visual elements. The textual subversion was realized as follows: Slogans combined two conflicting sentences, as for example in the Prague banner: “Ať žijí korejšťi studenti – ale za své!” [“Long live Korean students – but on their own money!”] (Matthews 1998: 29). The first part of the slogan was typical for the language of the central power structure, thus creating an initial ambiguity. The second part added a peripheral supplement, which subverted the original message, criticizing the financial support for North Korean students in Czechoslovakia. In other cases, the subversive supplement to the official message wasn’t explicitly mentioned, which meant that the decoding of the message relied entirely on the reading of the audience. This is exemplified in the Prague slogan “Ať vzkvétá aparát ČSM – opora naší práce!”

[“Let the apparatus of the ČSM flourish – it is the base of our work!”] (Svatoš 1999). Such enthusiasm for a bureaucratic apparatus encouraged an ironic reception.

The effect of the combination of visual and textual elements, on the other hand, relied often on their incongruity. During Bratislava Majales, the students carried a banner “Sovietsky zväz – náš vzor!” [“Soviet Union – our model!”] (Marušiak 2007: 26) alongside a deformed replica of Soviet Lomonosov University. The textual element referred to central collective representations, expressing the loyalty of peripheral Czechoslovakia to the sacred centre of international communism. However, the meaning was subverted by the visual dimension of the performance. The deformed replica functioned as synecdoche, suggesting not only that Lomonosov University was an unsuitable example to follow, but the Soviet Union in its entirety. A similar logic was employed by another performance in Bratislava: an emaciated student led by others, dressed as cooks, carried a placard “Stravujeme sa v Raji” [“We eat in Paradise”] (Interview 2). “Raj”, the Slovak term for Paradise, was an abbreviation for “Restaurace a jídelny” (“Restaurants and cafeterias”), the state monopoly which managed, alongside other institutions, student cafeterias. The humour resulted from the confrontation of the presumably harsh reality of student life and the reference to the ideal realm. The perceived absurdity of the discourse was demonstrated by a subversion of its own language, a technique which Umberto Eco (1998) calls “semiological guerrilla warfare”. What Czechoslovak students externalized through the conflict of meanings in their banners and allegories was a discrepancy between the everyday experience and its representation in the official discourse.

A sophisticated example of a subversion of the official language was performed by a group of students in clown costumes in Bratislava addressing the ongoing *Race of Peace* between Prague, Berlin and Warsaw (Marušiak 2007: 136). Instead of bicycles, the clowns rode scooters they kept falling off, while shouting “Hromadný pád, naša záchrana!” [“Collective fall, our rescue!”] (Interview 2). Each time one of them fell, a clown following the group helped him to his feet with a remedy – a glass of liquor from a demijohn he pushed on a cart. The top of the cart carried a placard “Náš záväzok: Nebudeme poslední!” [“Our promise: We won’t end up last!”]. The allegory presented an international event that was supposed to be a dignified athletic celebration of peace and brotherhood as a drunken clownery. The referent of the scene was, however, more general. The placard on the cart mimicked the official language of the central institutional system. Communist systems in the entire Eastern Bloc had a culture of promises and vows, in which institutions, teams and individual workers made public promises to improve their job performance. Such symbolic acts confirmed the society’s orientation towards the future, a key element of the central symbolic system. The students mocked these vows. Instead of being first, the drunken cyclist clowns could promise at best not to finish last. The use of the central symbol of the vow extended the referent of the allegory to society as a whole. The declarative public ritual was presented as a farce in the context of a grotesque reality. According to the drunken, disorganized clowns, the only way out was a collective fall. Not, of course, a fall from the scooter, but the fall of the regime. However, the students’ diagnosis of disorganization did not apply to the whole society. After the Majales carnival, the communist authorities got organized and made a concerted performative effort to quell the agitated student movement.

## The centre strikes back: meaning-control after Majales

In times of a cultural crisis, the message of the students, cheered by thousands of onlookers, threatened the centre's control over the periphery. However, the meaning of public events is never ready-made, but involves a process of meaning-making in which the exercise of "social power" (Alexander 2006: 36) plays a crucial role – a power wielded mostly by the official media, which were, in communist Czechoslovakia, controlled by the political centre. In our case, the exercise of social power can be treated as a (counter-) performance staged by the centre to impose its interpretation of the events and promote its own symbols and values.

First reports – Masks are allowed everything! Or not?

On Monday after the Bratislava Majales, May 14, the Slovak newspaper *Smena* published an article by Ladislav Švihran (1956) titled "Maskám je všetko dovolené!" ["The masks are allowed everything!"]. Its author provides a first-hand account of the events, stating that "Saturday's carnival was a spontaneous, unforced entertainment for both those in the parade and their audience" and claiming that "nobody speaks of anything but the carnival parade". Švihran, however, presents Majales mainly as a critique of higher education reforms and student living conditions. Nonetheless, he admits that the "sharp criticism did not miss any aspect of our life" referring specifically to the clownery of the "Race of Peace". Interestingly, Švihran mentions the "collective fall" on the placard, but omits the subversive continuation, "our rescue", reported by the refugee in Munich (Interview 2). On the same day, the newspaper *Práca* also published an article appreciative of the student carnival: "Bratislava has not seen such an event in a long time" (May 14, 1956: 2). Although most of the criticism was "correct", the author raised concerns, as some masks and performances "were surely not what the organizers expected" and the critique of Soviet architecture was, in his opinion, simply "mistaken".

Both reports, written and published before any official interpretation of the event was established, were positive, but cautious. While the report in *Smena* wilfully understated the political implications of some performances, the piece in *Práca* pre-emptively criticized the students' attack on the Soviet Union, a sacred element of the symbolic centre. Although both authors approved of the student carnival, they cautiously maintained a symbolic distance, which exemplifies the centre's control through self-censorship. Furthermore, already the day after Majales, the political apparatus tried to control its message directly. Švihran remembers (2007: 108) that the day before the publication of his article, his editor-in-chief was visited by a mysterious man, supposedly an employee of the Secret Police. Consequently, the text appeared only in the Bratislava edition of *Smena*, in an attempt to limit the flow of information about Majales to other regions of the country.

Although the political message of the Prague Majales was even more pronounced, it was conspicuously missing from newspaper reports, none of which appeared in the Slovak part of the country. The day after the parade, *Večerní Praha* described the Majales as "funny and satirical" (May 21, 1956: 1) and mentioned the support of the rector of Charles University. A similar article appeared in *Rudé Právo*, the main communist newspaper (May 21, 1956: 1). A day later, the youth daily *Mladá Fronta* portrayed it as a completely apolitical festival.

According to the article “Nejen chlebem, ale i legraci živ je člověk” [“Man needs not only bread but also fun”] (May 22, 1956: 1), crowded cafeterias were the students’ major concern. This time, it seems, the political apparatus was prepared and took control of the meanings of Majales immediately.

An altogether different festival was observed by Sydney Gruson (1956), a *New York Times* reporter who published on May 26 an article titled “Prague festival lampoons regime”. Despite being in the midst of the Cold War, Gruson offers a surprisingly balanced account. While describing the critical performances, he argued that “no effort was made to turn the occasion into a huge anti-Communist demonstration, as had been rumoured in Prague”. Gruson was, as a foreign reporter, entangled in a different structure of power than Czechoslovak journalists and could draw on a different set of signifiers and frames in his re-construction of the event. *The New York Times*, his employer, was not dependant on the goodwill of the central political apparatus. Another Western report, in *Life* magazine, attested that “students poked pointed fun at everything that had happened to academic life in eight years of Communism” and “were tinkering recklessly with (the) new freedom” (June 4, 1956: 54–55).

#### The party is/takes over

At the end of the month, the framing of the Majales began to shift. On May 25, the Prime Minister, Viliam Široký, could still say that “the students have the right to express their opinion aloud and we have the right to say what we agree with, and what not” (1956: 2). But one day later, the tone of the reports started to change. Josef Holler wrote in *Mladá Fronta* (May 26, 1956: 4) that despite “the abundance of healthy ideas and good caricatures”, the Prague Majales were “in some cases used to promulgate mistaken ideas” and “it is surprising that students, who in large part come from proletarian and peasant families, accepted some wrong demands so easily”.

In a similar vein, Milan Ferko stated in *Kultúrny život* (May 26, 1956: 1) that he initially supported the student activities in early 1956 but that the recent events were a “product of political reaction”. To support his claim, the author discussed the sophisticated information infrastructure maintained between the student cities, suggesting that “aero-taxis” delivered Prague resolutions to Bratislava – an often-repeated assertion and likely a product of Communist propaganda (Marušiak 2007: 27). Furthermore, he castigated the idea of Majales as “nonsensical” and “hysterical”. Nevertheless, Ferko maintained that “the majority of students [...] did not fall prey to the elements of political reaction”. While the author was harsh on the Majales, he tried to salvage the message of the student resolutions, creating a symbolic opposition between the two. This symbolic opposition was echoed in other articles that had a favourable view of the early student activities (Jelínek 1956; Mňačko 1956). On May 27, *Práca* published a concluding article called “Po týždni vzruchu” [“After a week of excitement”] (May 27, 1956: 2), in which readers were assured that the student party was over, “the exam period will begin shortly” and that the students were now “united in their support for the Party resolution”.



A further shift in the interpretation of Majales was marked by the 10th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, June 11–15, 1956. In his introductory speech, President Antonín Zápotocký defended the Party's control of the press, which the students had criticized: "We have always refused the freedom of the press and we decidedly refuse it now as well" (*Rudé Právo*, 12 June, 1956: 6). Zápotocký claimed that "recently, reactionary elements attempted to abuse the critique our party consciously develops with regard to our life and to mix with the students. These attempts failed". The Secretary of the Party, Václav Kopecký, seconded his statement by rejecting student demands for academic freedom as political reaction claiming that students had let "themselves be seduced" (*Mladá Fronta*, 15 June, 1956: 2).

On June 11, the state-wide Party periodical *Rudé Právo* informed its readers that Božena Plchová and Jaroslav Hájíček were arrested for the distribution of student resolutions (June 11, 1956: 3). The protagonists were portrayed as déclassé bourgeois who drafted the student resolutions inspired by broadcasts from *Radio Free Europe*. Three days later, *Mladá Fronta* published a report titled "Zneškodnění skupiny výrobců 'studentských resolucí'" ["A group of 'student resolution' producers arrested"] (June 14, 1956: 5), which left no doubt that there never had been any genuine student demands. František Kahuda (*Literární noviny*, June 23, 1956: 3) followed this line, arguing that while "the majority of students supports the Party and the Government", there were some opinions "aimed against the interest of our state, against our People's Democracy", which shows that "many replaced the Leninist legacy [...] with political humbug". According to him, the Majales were simply a "sign of indifferent class consciousness, of lack of Communist ethos". Kahuda identified the enemy, stating that "(responsible for Majales) were not the older students whose social structure is more favourable thanks to the higher percentage of working class students", but the youngest, who were admitted due to a supposedly more relaxed cadre policy.

By the time of the Hungarian revolution, in autumn 1956, the interpretation of Majales as the "product of reaction" was already firmly entrenched and partially attributed to the "low ideological-political standard of university students and teachers" (Marušiak 2007: 45). Consequently, the admission process was tightened as universities were told to accept "the children of capitalist, or formerly capitalist families only in exceptional [...] cases" (Marušiak 2007: 60).

The state apparatus employed two distinct strategies to control the meanings of Majales. First, there was a geographical meaning-control (or censorship), which prevented the news from reaching broader audiences. By restricting the flow of information from the epicentres of Majales to the geographical periphery, the interpretations of the event were spatially arrested and its impact was successfully minimized. Second, there was also meaning control (often due to self-censorship) regarding the content of the message. At first, Majales were discursively constructed as an unpolitical children's play. This was followed by a smear campaign that drew on the infantilised image of the students as misled by reactionary provocateurs, who were quickly identified as members of déclassé middle and upper class families. Thus, the events could be fully integrated into the central cultural system, embedded in the communist narratives of class conflict, progress and reaction. Even the Czech student in Italy, interviewed by an informer, argued that "the manifestation was organized 'from

above' to prove that 'de-Stalinization' is already making change [...] but later fascist and capitalist powers attempted to take control over the manifestation and because of that it degenerated" (Report 2). Finally, not only meanings were arrested, but also the alleged provocateurs. Students who actively participated in Majales were often expelled, or had their studies suspended (Marušiak 2007: 51–55).

## Conclusion

The Majales in Bratislava and Prague were not motivated by poverty, low housing quality or crowded cafeterias – despite some specific concerns voiced by students. They arose at a time when the symbolic centre was destabilized and the state apparatus lost its grip over the periphery. Majales were part of wider unrest in the Eastern Bloc that reached its apex in the Hungarian uprising. We have argued that this cultural destabilization was triggered by the death of Stalin, and culminated in his symbolic decapitation by Khrushchev. In this liminal situation, Majales emerged as a *subversive performance*, building on the momentum of an existing student movement demanding educational as well as social and political reforms. Although many expected the carnival to turn into an anti-regime protest, the students employed more subtle genres of criticism, reminiscent of medieval carnivals. Behind the seemingly harmless masks, however, were also political activists that subverted the official rituals of the Soviet-style Communist Party as well as its entire organizational culture. They targeted critical issues such as unrealistic economic promises, personalization of guilt instead of systematic self-criticism, and persistent distortion of information in the public media. Some went even further and criticized the entire symbolic system the Communist Party was supposed to represent. These performances were engendered by the semiosis process that underlies every creative symbolic act, breaking free from the cultural system, which thus far had arrested it.

Right from the outset, the structural centre attempted to control the interpretation of Majales. The flow of information was restricted and its importance was reduced to mere entertainment. Later, however, the Party itself intervened and recoded Majales as a reactionary plot. This allowed the political centre to assert its authority by embedding the student carnival into broader societal narratives of ongoing class struggle. Furthermore, such an interpretation legitimized disciplinary measures against students and was used to justify a change in the university admission procedures favouring the working class. The Majales in Bratislava and Prague in 1956 were creative bursts of protest quickly quelled by the structural centre. Nonetheless, they were symptoms – among others – of the cultural transformation in communist Europe, which did not return to its former Stalinist practices but pursued a programme of population control through other means. Majales, banned after 1956, re-emerged in the 1960s, again a time of cultural upheaval, in grand style – with the beatnik poet Allen Ginsberg elected as King Majales in 1965.

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