Prague Monuments and National Discourse

(Harvard University, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, spring semester 2006)

Marek Nekula (Senior Fellow)

It is no surprise that the monuments on Prague's squares, embankments and hills reflect the national ideologies from which they emanated. In the nineteenth century, when the founding of monuments developed, civil society used them to present and pass on its values. And these values were above all of a national character in nineteenth century Prague, where Czechs and Germans lived next to each other. In this time, national linguistic values – Czechs demanded equality for both the Czech and German languages and people, while Germans demanded keeping the status quo – superseded all other values and determined the political programs of all Czech political parties, which differed only in their strategies for realizing these goals. In Prague, public space became the staging ground for national discourse, where adherents of national ideologies competed with one another and attempted to control public opinion and public space. One of the forms of controlling and speaking to the public was the staging of ceremonial acts, for example the funeral of Karel Havlíček Borovský or Božena Němcová or the laying of the first stone of the Czech National Theater. Others were the „conquest" of an area by naming it, as in the case of the establishment of the Žižkov quarter in 1869 and the connection of city street names with the Hussite tradition; yet another was the construction of architecturally dominant buildings in the so called national style (National Theatre, National Museum, Rudolfinum) or monuments that had the primary function of presenting and representing the nation and its goals.

At the same time, the changing of an area or space into public space, in which it is possible to address the public, is closely connected to the development of modern civil society and the increasing participation of the individual in its public institutions. According to Max Weber it is in this civil society, which began to develop dynamically at the end of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, that a "public" is formed for the first time. The second part of creating a public is the creation of privacy and a private sphere for the modern individual, whom secularisation has freed from set religious values. It is therefore no coincidence that the squares, bridges and hills that began to be filled with national monuments in the nineteenth century had previously been dominated by sacral or votive structures, for example plague columns, or figurative portrayals of Christ and saints, which became a part of religious processions. The places themselves, in which these religious values were communicated, were nonetheless sacral structures. But just like a religious community is not a public that has been created by a civic society administrated by public institutions, sacral structures are not public places, but places of the liturgy and ritual. Despite this, these sacral and votive buildings and statues, for example the statues of the saints on the Charles Bridge, the original statue of Wenceslaus the Holy on Wenceslaus Square or the Pillar of Mary on the Old Town Square, were "translated" and read from a national point of view.

Civil society's monuments have much in common with the figurative depictions of saints: by the way they are placed, the way they distinguish the meaning of personalization and the visual presentation of ideological messages, by the selection of enduring construction materials, the endurance of which became a part of the semantics of not only figurative religious depictions, but also of civic monuments. The belief that monuments are constructed *sub species aeternitatis,* that is not only for the present but also for future generations, is combined with the belief in the eternal validity of the communicated values, which is also reflected by the amount of money invested by the public. Thematically, however, the monuments refer to the past, which they – from a modern perspective – rewrite. The placement, timing, iconography and ceremonies are used to react to the present: the reference to the past as well as the constructing of the relevant history serves to formulate the program for the future and to legitimise the present.

In Prague, where the national programs of Czech and German societies competed with one another since the nineteenth century, there are also monuments that dominate public spaces and affect public thought. This is also apparent in the representative buildings, monuments and other building projects in Prague that were financed by public funds or collections since the later 1860s, when a Czech majority controlled the city council. Examples of these projects are the Czech National Theater, the Palacký Bridge, Slavín (slavic pantheon), the Municipal House, the monument to František Palacký, and the monument to Jan Hus. Although this majority did not agree on how to push through demands for the equality and autonomy of the Czech language, nation and territory (the Bohemian Lands as a whole), they did, however, agree that it was necessary to advocate them. Monuments making reference to the time of Libussa and Hussite times communicated Slavic/Czech tolerance and democracy for both the Czech and German language and nation, which was the Czech political program of the nineteenth century, and gradually slavicized public areas in the center of the Bohemian Lands and excluded alternative ways of viewing Bohemian or Czech history and society.

The process of constructing, destructing and displaying monuments to Czech statehood in Prague, which may be followed from the First Republic (1918-1938) as well as during the Second Republic and the Protectorate (1938-1945), also reveals a shift from national to democratic or antidemocratic discourse. At the same time, both types of discourse also naturally converge outside the context of Prague monuments. Thus, in the tradition of F. Palacký, T. G. Masaryk saw national history and its meaning as a path beginning with the democratic values of Hussitism (as the predecessor of the Reformation – which in Palackýs writings is traced to the Slavic tolerance and democracy of Libuše's time (Libuše was the legendary founder of the "slavic" dynasty of the Bohemian princes/kings) that extends through the Enlightenment, the period of National Rebirth and Liberalism in the nineteenth century up to modern humanism, democracy and the founding of Czechoslovakia. If the "Czech question" according to Masaryk is a religious one, then mankind owes the Czech nation and the Czech reformation thanks for modern humanism and democracy. The official ideology of the First Republic repeatedly refers to the Czech reformation

by building monuments with Hussite themes, which connect Hussite and the modern democractic ideals of the Czechoslovakian state. One example of this may be found in the liberty monument in Žižkov that connects the Hussite tradition with the sacrifices of the legionnaires that in the ideology of the First Republic made the birth of Czechoslovakia possible. In contrast, the official ideology of the Protectorate questioned the independence of Czech (Slavic) cultures, statehood and Czech nation by referring to the deformed tradition of Saint Wenceslaus and attempted to remove it from collective memory by destroying monuments referring to its own democratic statehood. This may be seen in the closing of the liberty monument in Žižkov, in the destruction of the memorials to the legionnaires in front of the monastery Na Slovanech and in the Czech nation's coerced pledge of allegiance to the Führer after the assassination of R. Heydrich in 1942. This was staged in front of the statue to Saint Wenceslaus - where Czechoslovak statehood had been declared on October 28th 1918.

Not only the public, but also public space, which ceases to exist as such, begin to change after 1948. Squares, hills and open grounds become the backdrop for a class interpretation of Czech history and society as well as a place for ideological indoctrination. At the same time, socialist ideology attempts to legitimize class society by presenting socialism as the only logical conclusion to Czech national history, to which there can be no other historical alternative. Monuments are deliberately built next to national monuments or in sight of them during the Stalinism and Neo-Stalinism of the 1970s. In the context of the class discourse of the time, socialist iconography changed the "reading" of the iconography of national monuments, which were in this way incorporated into class discourse. For example, the monument to Stalin in Letná visually stretches out to the Old Town Square,which is in modern times connected with Hussitism and the February "revolution" of 1948 (the monument to Jan Hus from 1915, Klement Gottwald's Hussite rhetoric in his putsch speech on the Old Town Square, the connection of the Hussite and tradition of workers militias in the mosaic on the walls of the Old Town subway station), the liberty monument with the statue of Jan Žižka of Trochnov as a horseman is transformed into a monument to the workers' movement, the Bethlehem chapel is rebuilt in the 1950s in Prague, iconography arises in the (red) crimson and the (linden) green Prague subway lines, the names of its stations point both to building socialism and the brotherhood with the Soviet Union as well as to national history, particularly to Hussitism as in the stations Jan Želivský and Jiří/George of Poděbrad.

The explication of the iconography of Prague's monuments with respect to national and class ideologies of nineteenth and twentieth century Czech society is not a new endeavor. In addition to educational, journalistic and popular works that themselves help to create such ideology by making reference to the monuments in current discourse, such ideology is commented on critically in history and art history studies (V. Ledvinka, J. Pešek, references in the works of J. Rak a J. Kořalka) and in studies on cultural semiotics by Vladimír Macura. Above all I am thinking of Hojda's and Pokorný's studies on Prague monuments and Prahl's and Marek's studies of the National Theater. There are also a number of studies concerning national monuments both within and outside of Prague such as Čornej's work on Lipany or Vlnas' studie of

the cult of Nepomuk, in which the authors take their reception and presentation in changing historical contexts into consideration while interpreting the monuments' iconography and the semiotics of the spaces. I would include my own studies of Slavín in Vyšehrad cemetery and the iconography of Prague's bridges (see attachment) among these works.

In both of these published studies, as well as in unpublished manuscripts on the monument to Saint Wenceslaus on Wenceslaus Square, the Hussite monuments in Prague, the Czech National Theater, the Municipal House, metro etc., I drew on cultural semiotics and interpreted the meaning of the artifacts within the context of the values of historical discourse that stratifies, rewrites and obscures meanings both synchronically and diachronically. I intentionally build on Macura's conception of the semiotics of space as a referent and projection of public discourse and Lotman's conception of culture as a complete system of values, which are reflected both in actions and in artifacts of all kinds. I also employ Lotman's understanding of the artifact as a text that enters into a relationship with other texts, which expresses the values of that culture in a broader discursive context and becomes, through opposition or agreement with other artifacts and texts, signs. Macura has already shown in his studies that artifacts that are understood as texts not only enter into relationships with other artifact-texts, but also become the subject of literary discourse. While selecting illustrations of written discourse, I deliberately chose not to limit them to literary texts since theories of intertextuality and discourse assume that the themes, values and evaluation of historical discourse develop in discursive networks that greatly exceed the context of the production and reception of literary texts, much less a specific genre. I can draw on the works of R. Scollon and R. S. Wortman concerning the „capturing" of a space by naming it, by staging public ceremonies, by demonstrations or by the building of representative buildings and monuments that force out alternative models of social reality.

I see my new contribution in both my consistent application of cultural semiotics and the analysis of discourse and intertextuality to interpret Prague monuments, as well as my understanding of them as a continuum of signs that forms a diachronically changing system. This is particularly apparent in the iconography of Libuše in connection with the decoration, repertoire and staging of the Czech National Theater, Prague's bridges, Slavín, and the Municipal House. This iconography is complemented with Hussite iconography (see also Palacký's conception of Czech history as the pursuit of democratic ideals - he anchored his view of history in the time of Libuše and Hussitism) and appears in the same or other buildings and structures such as the monument to Jan Hus, the liberty monument with the statue of Jan Žižka from Trocnov or in connection with the founding of the town quarter of Žižkov, etc. This diachronically changing system of signs can also be seen in the iconography of the monument to Saint Wenceslaus on Wenceslaus Square and in the statues of Saint Wenceslaus on the Charles Bridge. Here the monuments referring to the changing tradition of Saint Wenceslaus, enter into a dialogue with monuments recurring to the Hussite tradition. It is also necessary to consider Slavín, the Czech National Theater, Prague's bridges and Municipal House as a whole - as a gradual taking over of public

space by „Czech“ iconography. This iconography appeals to the values of democracy and tolerance, which nineteenth century Czech national ideology evoked by referring to Slavism (Libuše and Hussitism) as a counter-weight to intolerance and bondage (Germanic feudalism). As a result of the demographic development in the nineteenth century and the gradual domination of public space by Czech iconography Prague itself becomes an icon of Slavism in the context of Czech culture, a complexly structured “monument” of Czechness.

During my Davis Center Fellowship, I would finish my book on this topic. I would look forward to consulting with members of the Harvard Slavistic Department who have worked on the semiotics of space and the cultural discourse, including Michael S. Flier, William Todd, Svetlana Boym, and Jonathan H. Bolton. I expect to cooperate with them by becoming part of a more general methodological discussion and by receiving inspiration on questions regarding the control and presentation of public space as well as a widening of the comparative perspective. The national discourse that Prague’s monuments conduct are not limited to a simple opposition to Germanness, but also to call for Slavism. Therefore a broader comparative perspective is possible while describing the iconography of Prague monuments and the semiotics of public space or when considering the occupying and ideologization of public space in other Slavic metropolises with different political and social basis. However, it is not even possible in the case of Prague to limit national discourse to Germanness and Czechness or Germanic and Slavic as it is reflected in monuments in Prague or in other cities in the Bohemian Lands. The view of Jewish intellectuals of the time is an important element and correction of the Czech/Slavic vs. German/Germanic national discourse presented in Prague monuments and in the monuments of Bohemian towns. These intellectuals, such as Franz Kafka, about whose languages I wrote a monograph as well as studies on his reflection of public space in Prague, oppose the control of public space at the turn of the twentieth century by a national discourse, from which the Jewish community was excluded.