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CEFRES, Prague, 5th April 2024**

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International Interdisciplinary Workshop “Prague and its Myths”, CEFRES, Prague, 5th April 2024

ALESSANDRO TESTA

On the 5th of April 2024, an international interdisciplinary workshop took place in Prague. The event was hosted by CEFRES (*Centre Français de Recherche en Sciences Sociales*) and sponsored by CEFRES itself, the Institute of Sociological Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University, and the Institute for Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences. The workshop focused on the city of Prague and its “myths”, a term that was intended to lend itself to a number of different uses, feeding upon its literal, analytical, and figurative acceptations. Stemming from an idea put forward in 2023 by Dr. Michèle Baussant (CEFRES) and Dr. Alessandro Testa (Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague and CEFRES), the workshop was organised by these two academics with the help of the Director of CEFRES, Dr. Mateusz Chmurski. This working group also acted as a scientific committee, selecting and inviting a number of internationally recognised scholars interested in the city of Prague and its cultural, religious, and “mythical” characterisations – said scholars came to Prague and presented their papers on the planned day.

The workshop explored the various declensions of the idea of Prague in modern and late modern times, with a focus on literature, social practices, religious phenomena, and heritage-making processes. These motifs or tropes are hereby defined as “myths”, borrowing from forms of both high and popular culture. They refer to specific images and traces of the contrasting and multifaceted pasts of Prague and its history. In particular, the city’s religious and esoteric heritage and its multicultural and “hinternational” background, to use Urzidil’s phrase, now find renewed value as symbols of a shared Czech identity and history, with some places dignified as places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) and others ignored or silenced (*lieux de l’oubli*), and their historical meanings partly recast.



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Some of these myths provide an important platform for mass tourism, too, which, somewhat paradoxically, revives Jewish sites, but also other religious or legendary places, as romanticised or “Disneyfied” spaces, partly disconnected from the living environments of memory.

The workshop aims to revisit these mythified pasts and their revival in Prague, with a particular focus on:

- The myth of “Praga magica”, the mystical city;
- The myth of Prague the “*Traumreich*” (Kafka, Meyrink, Ajvaz, Kubin, Crawford, and others);
- The myth of Prague the Jewish city;
- The myth of Prague the city of confrontation between Catholicism and its dissidents;
- The myth of Prague the multicultural and cosmopolitan city;
- The myth of Prague as a literary trope;
- The myth of Prague the charming city of many an architectural and artistic style;
- The myth of Prague the post-communist city of mass tourism.

What cultural trends have led to the valorisation of a mystical and esoteric past in a country that claims to be the most atheist in Europe? Or of a Jewish past in a place where there are very few Jews? Or of a cosmopolitanism that was partly eradicated after the Second World War? Using as a starting point Ripellino’s renowned book *Praga Magica*, which was published 50 years ago (in 1973), at the peak of the Soviet-imposed *normalizace* (the period of political repression in Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Prague Spring), we intend to revisit the often ambivalent social and cultural dynamics and transformations of Prague as reflected in literature, art, identity politics, old and new forms of religiosity and spirituality, and heritage making. We intend to explore these aspects against the backdrop of the city’s communist past and neoliberal present.

The above-quoted description functioned as a thematic map. Some if not most of those “myths” were reflected on or discussed in the papers that were ultimately selected for the event. At the workshop, which lasted from 10:00 until 16:30, the eight authors present and their presented papers were divided into three short panels, progressing as follows:

10.00: Mateusz Chmurski, Michèle Baussant, and Alessandro Testa:
“Introduction and Salutations”

10.15–11.15: Panel 1: Magical Prague

- 1) Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Humanities): “Prague: The City of Magic and Occultism”
- 2) Alessandro Testa (Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, CEFRES): “Praga Magica: The Late Modern Evolutions of a Cultural Myth”

11.45–12.45: Panel 2: Religious Prague

- 3) Tomáš Bubík (Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Arts): “‘Religious’ Prague: Scenes from Selected Public Spaces (a Cemetery, a Square, a Museum)”
- 4) Michèle Baussant (Institut des sciences sociales du politique, ISP CNRS-Paris Nanterre-ENS/CEFRES): “Une Prague des absent.es? Entre renaissance de l’héritage juif et récréation d’une vie cultu(r)elle”

14.30–16.00: Panel 3: Modern Prague

- 5) Jean Boutan (Cultures d’Europe orientale, balkanique et médiane, Eur’ORBEM, CNRS-Sorbonne Université): “Libuše reine de Cacanée: la postérité d’un mythe d’un autre temps après 1918”
- 6) Richard Müller (Institute for Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences): “Kafka, Simmel, and Writing the Metropolitan Mind”
- 7) Stanislav Holubec (Institute of History, Czech Academy of Sciences): “The Myth of Working Class Prague: Between Communist Sacralization and Post-communist Forgetting”
- 8) Jiří Pelán (Faculty of Arts, Charles University): “Angelo Maria Ripellino et l’an 1968” (this paper was eventually withdrawn and Prof. Pelán did not participate in the workshop)

16.00–16.30: Final discussion

The original idea of the workshop was developed following a reflection on a number of celebrations that had taken place in 2023 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Angelo Maria Ripellino’s birth and the 50th year since the publication of *Praga Magica*. This renowned book by the Sicilian scholar, writer, poet, journalist, and Czechophile constituted the starting point and ideal guide through the exploration of Prague and its mythical *genii locorum*, its connotations of *Traumreich*, and lieu of magic, from medieval wonders to fin-de-siècle decadentism and gothicism through the age of Rudolf II, the alchemical emperor, and other historical or legendary tropes. This was at least the focus of the first panel of the conference, but

the name of Ripellino and the spirit of the book lingered over the entire event and were recurrent in the discussions that followed each panel.

Of particular interest for this journal were panel 1 and panel 2 of the workshop, respectively about “magical Prague” and “religious Prague”, whereas the last and longest panel focused on more historical and socio-political matters. Three religionists presented their papers about different aspects of the real or imagined magico-religious attributes of the city, namely Marco Pasi from the University of Amsterdam, Alessandro Testa from Charles University, and Tomáš Bubík from Palacký University in Olomouc. The French social anthropologist Michèle Baussant (CEFRES) discussed the real or imagined Jewish religious heritage of the Czech capital city.

Far from acritically capitulating to the enchanting power of Prague (*“vždy znova a znova obluzuje svými čáry stará čarodějka Praha”* / “over and over again does the old sorceress Prague bewitch with her spells” wrote Arnošt Procházka in the early 20th century), thus lending their voices to a mere reproduction of known and at times trite tropes about the City of a Hundred Spires, these scholars engaged in a thorough problematisation of “magical” Prague and of the various, diverse, and at times conflictual manifestations of religious heritage of the city. The mythical dimensions appeared time and again as a specific mark of the way the past or the very essence of the city has been characterised during the centuries, and this in poetry, fiction, theatre, fine (and occult) arts, music, architecture, cinema, and even philosophy and historiography.

The event was successful in bringing together scholars from different disciplines and working on different and sometimes very different topics, and in so doing bridging knowledge gaps about the factual or mythical history of Prague. The event was obviously also an act of love for the city itself, and a proof of its perennial capacity to inspire not only poetic, fictional, and magical imaginaries, but also the interpretation and analysis thereof.