

## The next big thing

**Robert Fine**

*University of Warwick, Coventry, UK*

María Pía Lara, whom I met in a gloomy, wet, alcohol-bereft conference in North Wales, introduced me to the Prague symposium. Our friendship was inspired by mutual delight in the works of Hannah Arendt. In Prague I gained the impression that for many of the participants this was not just one conference among many in the annual academic calendar but an event in the most eventful of senses.

The emphasis of the Prague symposium, as far as I could see, was on the normative aspects of critical theory from Kant, through Rawls, Habermas and Honneth, to contemporary struggles for recognition now being waged among those aspiring to lead the next generation of critical theory. The symposium was not easy to navigate, it was capable of inciting discontent, but it was alive.

My idealized perception of the symposium is that it offers a safe place to speak from the margins. I, for one, could discuss and develop cosmopolitan ideas rooted as much in Hegel's critique of the modern system of right as in Kant's normative metaphysics of right; as much in Hannah Arendt's response to the 'dark times' of fascism and Stalinism as in Ulrich Beck's forward-looking 'cosmopolitan vision'; as much in the repudiation of European pretensions to be a privileged site for post-nationalism as in the project of constructing a post-national Europe; as much in the dark underbelly of human rights as in the furthering of the human rights revolution; as much in the recurrence of the 'Jewish question' today as in the historicizing of European anti-Semitism as a done-and-dusted pathology of the past; as much in the responsibility of power to protect victims of extreme violence as in the espousal of 'anti-imperialism'; and as much in the critical force of natural law as in the exposure of secret powers and interests.

Prague – with its memories of occupation, Holocaust, postwar democracy, communist usurpation, the '68 spring, the repression and liberation, and now with its open arms to tourist mobility and its closures to refugee mobility – is a place that resists one-dimensional images: whether illusions of the new Europe as once again the civilized continent that had learned socially from its own barbaric past or illusions of an old Europe incapable of learning and once again defined by nationalism, racism and

---

**Corresponding author:**

Robert Fine, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV47AL, UK.

Email: [robert.fine@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:robert.fine@warwick.ac.uk)

exclusion. 'Prague' means to me a space in which to be critical but not to demonize: critical, say, of American imperialism without making it culpable of all the wrongs in the world; critical, say, of Eurocentrism without erasing the achievements of postwar Europe; critical of 'interventionism' without forgetting times when America has rescued Europeans from their own follies or the sometimes disastrous consequences of non-intervention.

Such is my idealized image of the Prague symposium. In this regard I have found it a largely accepting place to experiment with unorthodoxies: with a cosmopolitanism that does not project all that is wrong with nationalism on any one particular nation; that does not separate out different forms of racism and prejudice as if this one is real and that one is a devious form of conspiratorial instrumentalism; that couples commitment to the modern revolutionary tradition and its evolution with an understanding that moderation, relativity and struggles against absolutism are also the lifeblood of revolutionary thought and practice.

When we do philosophy, we try to strip it of its excesses of universalism and prescriptive zeal. When we do sociology, we resist the elevation of any particular identity and provenance over our universal human condition. When we do left politics, we combat nihilistic tendencies toward indifference or hostility to rights, law, the state and reason. The point of critical theory is to stop and think, to engage with others in critical thinking, to understand the world that is beyond ourselves; not to turn critical theory into a fixed idea with its own criteria of inclusion and exclusion, its own commandments concerning which authors or texts are 'in' or 'out', its own pre-recorded images of what this iconic author said and how it differs from what another said.

Critical theory is an evolving tradition. It includes thinking about thinking itself and its own potential destructiveness; it includes critique of critique itself and its own sense of superiority over the world; it includes skepticism toward yet another theory that claims to be the last word. 'Prague' is an academic conference in a hospitable setting, which at its best carries the force of example of what critical theory is and can be. On a personal note, the Prague symposium has been kind to me – it has provided for me a stage from which to speak and be questioned, a theatre in which to hear and question others, a network that has helped me publish my research, a convivial society in which to make friends and keep them. I think I am not alone when I say that sometimes I find myself out of sorts, but time and time again I come back for more, eager to encounter and then cavil about the next big thing.

## Note

Thanks to Alessandro Ferrara for organizing, and including me in, this project.