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# Book Review of Paulina Bren. *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after 1968* Prague Spring

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## Book Review of Paulina Bren. *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after 1968 Prague Spring*

### **Abstract**

In this provocative book, Paulina Bren brings to life the “stagnant” decades of “nothingness” (4) that followed the 1968 Prague Spring and the failure of a Communist reform movement in Czechoslovakia. Officially called the period of “normalization,” when life was meant to return to “normal” after the upheaval of the reform period and the resulting invasion of the country by Warsaw Pact troops, scholars have not devoted much attention to topics other than dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s. Bren attributes this gap to the immense challenge of writing a history without notable events or transformative conflicts, although by the end of the book, with its bold rereading of the standard history of the period, this characterization seems less apt. Readers will be struck by how uneventful and dreary everyday life appears in the text. Yet the book's cumulative effect is not to simply interrogate this boredom, but rather to emphasize how much more fraught, complex, and laden with cultural meaning these decades were than previously thought.

### **Disciplines**

Slavic Languages and Societies | Television

### **Comments**

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## **Book Review**

Paulina Bren. *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after 1968 Prague Spring*.

In this provocative book, Paulina Bren brings to life the "stagnant" decades of "nothingness" (4) that followed the 1968 Prague Spring and the failure of a Communist reform movement in Czechoslovakia. Officially called the period of "normalization," when life was meant to return to "normal" after the upheaval of the reform period and the resulting invasion of the country by Warsaw Pact troops, scholars have not devoted much attention to topics other than dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s. Bren attributes this gap to the immense challenge of writing a history without notable events or transformative conflicts, although by the end of the book, with its bold rereading of the standard history of the period, this characterization seems less apt. Readers will be struck by how uneventful and dreary everyday life appears in the text. Yet the book's cumulative effect is not to simply interrogate this boredom, but rather to emphasize how much more fraught, complex, and laden with cultural meaning these decades were than previously thought.

The book's success in making this case derives not only from lively prose and clear argumentation, but also from Bren's ingenious decision to turn to television serials (shows in which a continuous plot unfolds through a series of episodes) as a frame through which to critically examine the period when official sources proved unsatisfactory. She portrays this choice as a necessity, but she deserves praise for boldly conceptualizing this potential detour as the basis for an analysis of high politics, dissident culture, and national identity, rather than just as the material for an institutional history of Czechoslovak state television. The result is a paradigm-shifting book that all scholars of postwar Europe should read.

Divided into eight compact chapters, the book uses television to explore issues of high politics, social movements, intellectual history, popular culture, gender, and media studies with impressive depth and breadth. Chapters one and two chronicle the role of media in the events of the Prague Spring and the purge of reformers from the Communist Party—and the ranks of Czechoslovak state television—during a post-1968 ideological reorientation. Chapters three and four examine the rewriting of an official collective memory of the 1960s through cultural erasure and placing blame on intellectuals, Jews, and western imperialists for fomenting a "mass hysteria" that led to the Prague Spring (72). Through detailed plot summaries, Bren also describes how state-supported popular television serials, such as the thirty-episode detective serial, *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman*, became shared cultural experiences that helped to construct a normalization-era national identity (an astounding 90% of the population watched this show from 1974 to 1979).

These middle chapters are particularly strong as Bren shows how dissident discourse, including the work of Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, reflected reactionary, and often elitist, positions put forward by intellectuals purged from the Party in the late 1960s. These dissidents, many of whom would be leaders of the Charter 77 movement, were frustrated by the almost universal embrace of the "quiet life" made possible by government policies that increased production of housing and consumer goods, and which was idealized in television serials. In the face of this pressure to conform, dissidents called for authenticity, "living in truth," a phrase made famous in Havel's essay, "The Power of the Powerless," featuring the compliant greengrocer of the book's title.

The second half of the book delves more deeply into television culture itself, considering particular serials and the era's most popular television writer, Jaroslav Dietl. The discussion is multifaceted as Bren brings together information from archives, newspapers, and visual media to not only recount the plots of the serials and place them within the cultural context of normalization, but also to consider the public's reception of the shows through viewer letters and internal reports. Chapter five discusses changes at Czechoslovak state television that made serials an important format for evening viewing. Chapter six introduces Dietl, a committed Communist in the 1950s, whose television work was popular in the 1960s before he was purged. After stints in Ostrava and writing anonymously, he returned to official prominence in the early 1970s by declaring his support for the normalization regime in a high profile scripted television interview. With this public statement, Dietl was once again embraced by state television, which was desperate for his writing talents to improve their offerings in the face of competition from western media outlets whose broadcasts reached into some Czechoslovak territory.

The final two chapters consider the ways in which Dietl's 1970s and 1980s serials helped to shape the period's attitudes to family life, gender roles, and social conformity. His female characters in particular became iconic Communist women who managed their lives at work and at home with boundless energy. Chapter eight also introduces the late Communist discourse of "self-realization" that emphasized a life of "social comfort and social calm" that led many to focus on becoming model consumers—preparing for the world of plenty portrayed on television—rather than hard workers and civic participants (188). One of the book's most important contributions is to question and ultimately undo the received dichotomy between the public and private spheres that pervades earlier scholarship on normalization and dissidents. Bren shows that "ordinary citizens did not...lead lives bifurcated by clear-cut public and private realms: a compliant public mask at work and a liberated self at home" (7). Instead, she describes the experience of normalization life with the metaphor of a no-man's land between two trenches, a space that is simultaneously public and private, and which is expanding to reach into each trench, slowly erasing their edges.

If there is a weakness in the project it is one of limited geographic scope rather than content or argumentation. Scholars looking for comparative analyses of multiple national contexts or discussions of differences in the role of television in Communist and capitalist countries will not find this case study broad enough. Readers less familiar with European Communism or Czech history might get lost in some of the details and miss subtle points of emphasis, but regional specialists will be more than satisfied by its comprehensive treatment of the subject. Anyone interested in postwar Europe, dissident culture, media portrayals of family life and gender roles, and the history of television will enjoy and learn from this book.

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