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## Conclusion

ON A DREARY WINTER AFTERNOON in late February 2000, I sat across from Běta in her two-bedroom *panelák* abode. She shared this small space with her husband, her two daughters, her grandson, and a dog. On this particular afternoon, Běta and I sat alone, in the quiet of her living room. This calm, however, was quickly broken when I asked to hear her story: “Jesus Mary! Story? What story? What? Thousands of other women . . . go to work, have children, have families,” she responded incredulously. Běta wondered where the story was. Did she have a story? In my view, lived experiences—whether of jobs, childbearing, or family—do not exist outside of stories. Life experiences are narratively constituted. Individuals think about and talk about what has happened and is happening to them in storied form. This is people’s main mode of making meaning out of their life experiences. Indeed, as Roland Barthes long ago contended, “There does not exist, and there never has existed, a people without narratives” ([1966] 1977:14). Therefore, I told Běta, everyone has a story.

In her initial interpretive impulse, Běta would acknowledge that she was like “thousands of others” for whom the responsibilities of a job,

childbearing, and family lend a common structure to their lives. This is true not only for Czech women but for many women more globally. In Běta's intimation, however, these contours seemed to take shape irrespective of time and place. On the contrary, I argue that stories are embedded in time and place. Put more simply, when and where people are—historically, culturally, and socially—matters significantly for how people narratively apprehend their lives. What renders Běta's remark especially astonishing is that her lifeworld has taken shape within the context of a radical revisioning of her country's larger political and economic order in its transition from socialism to capitalism and democracy. Personal stories do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are entrenched in—enabled and constrained by—their historical, cultural, and social settings. In this sense, women's lives are far more contextually contingent than Běta acknowledged.

### A Triumphant Tale

What is happiness like?  
 What makes a dream full?  
 How can anything be bright  
 When the day is so dull?

You see what you want  
 No need to idealize  
 Life lasts but a second,  
 So want truth, not lies.

We're just a tiny land  
 We're just a little place  
 But we can take nothing  
 And build castles up into space. . . .

The earth becomes Shangri-la . . .  
 —*Český sen* theme song

After 1989, a neoliberally informed capitalism attempted to enfold the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) into its globally expansive embrace. Many observers awaited its social rebuff, especially from women and workers, for whom loss and victimization would purportedly define their free-market encounter. A decade later, women and

workers had yet to spurn this new economic order. In the Czech context, the market, metanarratively expressed, subverts an oppressed sensibility, supplanting it with a liberated one. With its lodestones of naturality and normality, this metastory proves of irresistible allure to a populace worn out on the socialist experiment and longing “to be normal” (Kennedy 1994:4). After forty years inside a socialist penitentiary, they now stand outside its walls in a world that they have long imagined as the antithesis of their socialist cell. The notion that they have left one prison only to enter another is incomprehensible. In this postsocialist environment, capitalism’s corollary is freedom. It is the “alternative to the ill-discipline, corrupt morality and ill-conceived rationality of planned state socialism” (Dilley 1992:19). And although people may have a “predilection for alternatives,” few, if any, exist at this time and in this place (Said 1983:247). Whether perhaps only a fictional tale or utopic reverie, the market metanarrative is a formidable force. The market as an ideology is not a “floating epiphenomenon”; rather, it “filters down to the repertoire of interpretive schemata held by social actors,” providing a mode of sense-making (Dilley 1992:21, 23).

Scholars have tended to overlook or downplay this ideological prowess. With communism’s metanarrative now in disrepute, the market’s metanarrative has subsumed much of the resulting ideological space. The Czechs’ promarket attitudes and their country’s distinction as an oasis of economic success in the CEE region for much of the 1990s arguably intensified this already skewed ideological balance of power. For Czech female managers and factory workers, the supremacy of Václav Klaus’s vision and its undeclared sustenance with a neoliberal–social democratic blend of macroeconomic practices displaced any alternative to the market metanarrative. Faced with an otherwise uncertain and unclear future, they have looked to this market metastory for certitude and clarity.<sup>1</sup> It offers a “means of coming to terms” with everyday experiences and constitutes an “explanatory device for their failures and successes” (Dilley 1992:23). And this figurative gaze fosters their compliance.

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1. As Dilley notes, “The paradox here is that the market is elevated to the touchstone of certainty in a world in which changes were wrought under the very banner of the market” (1992:22).

### Constrained (Self-)Consciousness and (Im)Mobilization

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this triumphant tale is how Czech female managers and factory workers have appropriated it. Members of neither group sing a doleful song, with loss and victimization its refrain. To the contrary, managers happily chant the market's mantras, while factory workers intone an expectant tune with an improvised chorus of "Pain for a future generation's gain." While the experiential distance between these two groups is vast, their creative interpretations of their lived experiences narrow the gap. Bridging this experiential divide are the liberatory links of the market metanarrative. Their lived experiences are refracted quite differently through the lens of the market metanarrative but share the same vision. Both groups metaphorically see a free market that augurs good rather than bad fortune. Managers' stories defy the generalizations of a gendered misfortune in the economic transition. Many scholars, looking so determinedly for gendered adversity, have failed to consider such an alternative. Indeed, a heterogeneity of women's experiences exists in the CEE countries. In the workers' sagas, the suffering and struggle created by capitalism's arrival are to be endured rather than resisted. In their inflection of the market metanarrative, they are investing for future profit. The factory workers' experiences appear to represent the fruition of the apprehensions of many gender scholars. The workers have lost and are victimized, but scholars have not grasped how these women interpret their tribulations. Moreover, the explanation for workers' political inactivity here extends well beyond institutional and ideological inheritances from their socialist past to an ideological manifestation bequeathed to them in the post-socialist present. Whether for women or for workers, loss and victimization are not as readily given as many scholars would have them.

For both managers and factory workers, the possibilities of the market metanarrative do not exist without the impossibilities. Managers perceive that their postsocialist journey has led to economic and social success—that is, money and power. Their ability to travel this road has involved abandoning a set of "socialist" behaviors—that is, irresponsibility and dependence. To make their way, however, they have assumed an alternative "market" mode of comportment that includes self-reliance, personal responsibility, and independence. By their calculations, this behavioral swap bears the lion's share of the credit for the fact that they are winners rather than losers. This exchange

has affected every facet of their lives—public (e.g., as citizens) and private (e.g., as mothers). They portray their postsocialist paths as unimpeded. More specifically, the identity of “woman” does not block their course. Gendered oppression does not easily square with the market’s promise of liberation. Because of the market metanarrative’s seeming intractability, they “tailor ‘reality’ to fit” with the market metastory (Somers and Gibson 1994:61). Their virtually wholesale denial of gender-based discrimination is perhaps the most egregious insinuation of this adjustment. Another example appears in a rationalization of housework in which they escape its gendered exploitation but in so doing foist its oppressive drudgery on to lower-class women. In their interpretive co-optation of all labor—productive and reproductive—into the market, they seek to quell these contradictions. To acknowledge this perpetuation of a gendered inequality in which they would be implicated as “women” would likely generate an irreparable rupture in their narratives. For them, such a constraint is seemingly irreconcilable with market freedom. According to Margaret R. Somers and Gloria Gibson, “some of the outcomes of an inability or powerlessness to accommodate certain happenings” include confusion, despair, and even madness (1994:74). To avoid such ends, they suppress the inconsistency. Moreover, their abdication of reproductive labor’s state support contains no expression of a gendered solidarity that would counter the divisiveness of class privilege. For these twenty-six women, accepting the market also means rejecting the state. In their understandings, the market metanarrative pledges an unqualified liberation for all who are able. Their own “liberation” is founded in a complete adherence to the metanarrative’s neoliberal subtext according to which state intervention is villainous. As these members of a new elite tell it, their postsocialist story is solely an empowering one. They conceive of their postsocialist present as the “radiant future.” And, they conclude, this future can belong to anyone.

In Czech female factory workers’ recounting of their postsocialist travels, they have embarked down a road in which their mobility is limited to the economic and social peripheries. Their appropriation of the market metanarrative leaves them intensely conscious of their marginalized identity as “women workers.” They lack the human capital that has propelled female managers’ occupational mobility. Unlike their managerial counterparts, who hold university degrees, factory workers seldom have obtained any postsecondary schooling. Moreover, they

lack any foreign-language ability that would enable them to communicate in the global marketplace. Economically, they are struggling to merely maintain their foothold on the lower rungs of the rapidly lengthening ladder of remuneration. There is no climbing up; holding on proves enough of a challenge. In addition, state support—a luxury the managers can afford to turn down—is a necessity for factory workers. As class inequality replaces the economic pseudo-equality of state socialism, they self-identify as members of a new social category—the “poor.” They hear the market metanarrative’s invocations for self-reliance, personal responsibility, and independence, but employers’ unwillingness to pay a “decent” wage, these women contend, impedes their ability to heed such calls. Although the feminization of light manufacturing may have curbed their chances of a job dismissal, the benefits of being a woman end here. Their gender—more concretely, their gender role as mothers—is not a new levy, but it has grown in the new market economy. Without the socialist state’s mandated inclusion of all able citizens into the labor force, exclusion is now a possibility. Women, long deemed “unreliable” workers, are among the more likely candidates. A socialist legacy in which work took center stage in individuals’ lives, providing not only “collective survival” but also “individual status,” acts to intensify their angst about such a loss (Offe 1996:235). The perceived instability of their postsocialist standing along both gender and class lines renders them tolerant of employers’ abuses such as forced leaves and docking of wages. In Czech female factory workers’ telling of their postsocialist lives, the losses seem to abound. Yet they perceive these sacrifices as necessary for a greater good. According to its metastory, the market will enfranchise all. In this new economic game, everyone wins. There can be no “losers.” Such an identity is an incongruity. Consequently, they “adjust” the market metanarrative to “fit their own identities” (Somers and Gibson 1994:61). To cope with the illogicality of their losses, these forty-eight workers interpret their adversity as temporary and direct their reproach inward: born and raised under state socialism, they are unable to wipe off socialism’s stain. This is a solely a generational dilemma. Future generations will start with a clean slate and thus will reap capitalism’s rewards. These women have no apparent sense of the “totality” of the “wider structure” of their exploitation (Mann 1973:13). According to the market metanarrative, capitalism will bring salvation rather than condemnation. Thus,

capitalism cannot be the cause of these women's social and economic dislocation.

While elements of oppression, loss, and victimization are present, they go unrecognized or are deemed irrelevant from the subjective standpoint of these seventy-four managers and factory workers. The interpretive frames that many—mostly Western—scholars assumed do not necessarily exist in a postsocialist milieu. Those subjugating aspects of capitalism that may appear continuous across West and East are nevertheless understood quite differently in the two regions. Beginning from a subjective standpoint ultimately enables comprehension of an unexpected endpoint. This bottom-up examination proves vital to solving the puzzle of Czech female managers' and factory workers' passivity. Through their microworlds, the significant intersections of global and local, public and personal, as well as their implications for social (in)equality become apparent. In the decade after socialism's collapse, these seventy-four women encountered a constricted narrative universe in which the communist metanarrative has been eclipsed. In their post-socialist country, the market metastory has come to the fore. These Czech women seem to have no conceivable alternative.<sup>2</sup> Their interpretive schemata are resolutely entrenched in a metanarrative about the market. And thus, in complicated and sometimes counterintuitive ways, they integrate their personal experiences with this hegemonic public metastory about the free market. Out of this accomplishment comes what it means for them—its empowering and disempowering consequences.

Female managers have been able to forgo state supports. However, as Susan Gal and Gail Kligman conclude, "Selling one's labor without . . . social benefits is not necessarily emancipation" (2000a:116). Many of these women have also been able to afford to relinquish some of their reproductive labor to an emerging occupational stratum of maids, nannies, and babysitters. Some female managers have destabilized the gendered division of domestic labor, negotiating a more equitable allocation. However, their "individuality run wild" hinders any sense of common interests, especially along gender lines (Nelson 1996:30). In their appropriation of the market metanarrative, they are unable to rec-

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2. Consistent with Mann 1973, *alternative* here refers to the ability to envision another social order.

ognize themselves categorically as “women” and are thus unable to conceptualize themselves as having common—gendered—interests. Without this collective perception, gender-based discrimination in the labor market goes unopposed. Here, the effect is not only a collective disempowerment of women but also very likely an immediate (and long-term) disempowerment of these individuals. Moreover, their indiscriminate rejection of the state undercuts gendered or familial claims-making on the state for social rights.<sup>3</sup> Their class location moderates any prospect of its implications being felt personally. Nonetheless, the ramifications are societal; the managers are implicated as part of society. For better and for worse, for the managers, self-interest holds sway in the new market economy.

In female factory workers’ assimilation of the market metanarrative, gendered and class senses of self are less squelched. The litany of injustices done is too great to ignore. They have not been enfranchised in the move toward the market; instead, they must “hunt for money,” having “fallen to the bottom” of the Czech economy. These women must put in laborious hours of shopping to maximize their spending power and must endure humiliating visits to state welfare offices to have their income tested to determine their eligibility for state supports. How fast and how far they have fallen has shattered their sense of sameness in class terms. The intensity and the state’s regular reminders of this socioeconomic disenfranchisement have heightened the factory workers’ class-based sense of self. They grapple with the angst of insecure jobs and an awareness that their childbearing and child rearing mean that they have two strikes against them in employers’ eyes. Female factory workers cannot counter gendered exclusion as readily as female managers can. The workers’ limited human capital restricts their job prospects. Here, gender is perceived as a probable impasse, and the identity of “woman” is a shared subjectivity. Its perils arguably intensify rather than weaken this sensibility. Fearing that any defiance of an employer would constitute a third strike and that they would be cast out, these women endure employers’ misbehavior without open complaint. For Czech female factory workers, the bad effectively far outweighs the good.

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3. Social rights refer to “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (Marshall 1950:11).

## Unfreedom and Freedom

For forty years, the Czechoslovak Communist Party held tight rein over these women's lives. The party influenced their educational and occupational prospects as well as that of their spouses and their children. It determined where they could travel and much of how they would live. Life was unequivocally unfree. They could not act at will. Having lived through socialism, these seventy-four women could not deny its constraints. The market metanarrative tells them that the free market is their way out of this confinement. In the face of *What now?* this metastory provides an assurance that a "radiant future" is coming. Furthermore, the metanarrative seems to give the women back their individual autonomy, setting new "parameters of action" (Burawoy and Verdery 1999:2). The market metanarrative suggests that the will of the state no longer decides these women's fate; rather, individual will does so. People will be rewarded on the basis of their merit. The market will return the control that the state confiscated. As these women understand the metanarrative, it gives them power. For these women who lived through state socialism, its passing is irrefutable. Indeed, this lived experience arguably renders the market metastory even more gripping. In the wake of state socialism, they find it difficult if not impossible to turn away from the market's comforting metastory and its happy ending—freedom and prosperity for all. In the market metanarrative, unfreedom and freedom are systemically tied. Socialism is correlated with the former; capitalism with the latter. Disempowerment and empowerment are systemically exclusive. In other words, capitalism only empowers. For female managers and factory workers, any disempowerment they experience challenges the ideology of the metanarrative. This challenge does not, however, compel them to cast their narrative gaze elsewhere—they seem to have virtually nowhere else to look. The communist counternarrative has been discredited and lies in tatters; the capitalist counterstory, however, appears intact. To avoid a Kafkaesque state of being, they interpretively overcome any incoherencies. These adaptations enable them to find solace in circumstances they cannot wholly control.

In 2003, William Rosenberg lamented the way in which the contemporary telling of the Soviet bloc's past and future "has so easily flattened complexity, and crude political reductions obliterate the portentous social meanings of loss and deprivation" (3). Indeed, this

flattening of the complexities of lived experiences manifests in the Czech female managers' and factory workers' postsocialist parables. They interpretively process their past, present, and future by drawing on a "politicized narrative" in which the systemic correlates of the captivity-into-freedom trope are reversed (3). In their past, capitalism was "genuine evil" and communism was "inherently good" (3). Now, capitalism is deemed natural and moral, while communism is marked as unnatural and immoral. This metanarrative's appropriation subdues elements of the lived experiences of Czech female managers and factory workers. In their understandings, the market metanarrative commands conformity to its plot. They fashion their identities around the contradictions between experience and the ideological assertions encoded in this meta-tale. Of even greater importance are the implications of the metanarrative's accommodations for their actions. Czech female managers turn away from even those state supports for which they are eligible, choosing instead to rely on themselves. Furthermore, some of these women command greater equity in the home. However, the metanarrative silences their antagonism with respect to gender-based discrimination. Meanwhile, Czech female factory workers wait. They believe that their loss and victimization are not determinants of the future. Thus, they tolerate what they might otherwise see as intolerable. Their motivation to resist capitalism is stifled. However, should coming generations not reap the free market's promised rewards, the ground might become more fertile for the development of a gendered and/or class-mobilized opposition.

### The Power of Stories

According to Karl Mannheim, "There are modes of thought which cannot be understood as long as their social origins are obscured" (1936:2). The ideas that define and "motivate people" do not originate in them alone; thus, the critical task is to discover and make visible their origins (2). As Laurel Richardson explains, this is a challenge for ordinary people who make sense of their lives most often "in terms of specific events" and seldom voice how larger social and historical factors have impacted them (1999:130). According to both Mannheim and Richardson, sociologists have the capacity to break this narrative silence. Indeed, what C. Wright Mills (1959) termed the "sociological imagina-

tion” has the capacity to make visible the larger context in which individuals’ lives take shape. As a sociologist, I have sought in this book to reveal how the identities and actions of seventy-four Czech female managers and factory workers are market metanarratively constituted. Doing so has required me to become a nomad of sorts. I have traveled back and forth not only between their lived experiences and interpretations of them but also between their personal narratives and a public metastory about the market. To truly apprehend who these women are, what they do, and most importantly why they opt for these modes of being and acting in lieu of others requires such migrations.

In its broadest theoretical and methodological sensibilities, this book concerned stories. More precisely, it dealt with how different kinds of stories—international and national, public and personal—were put together and the consequences of this composition for social identities and actions. Empirically, this work focused on the Czech Republic’s encounter with the free market. I make no claims regarding the overall generalizability of Czech female managers’ and female factory workers’ means of making sense of marketization. Both in practice and in ideology, the Czech Republic’s post-1989 economic journey makes the country rather distinctive in the postsocialist world. Nonetheless, marketization is not an isolated phenomena. Over the span of more than two decades, a capitalism with neoliberal leanings has gone global. In its penetration of postsocialist spaces, it found an audience eager to escape the prison of the socialist past in favor of the promised freedom of the free market—ready to trade a Marxist-Leninist destiny for a free-market fate. These seventy-four women are among the many people not only in the postsocialist world but in a more global world in which a neoliberal capitalism looms—omnipresent and omnipotent—with few if any apparent alternatives. Experienced or not, Czech female managers and factory workers interpret capitalism as liberatory in the first decade after socialism. The managers have accrued considerable gains, while the workers’ losses have proven equally immense. Nevertheless, both groups consent to this capitalist course, attributing its downside to individual faults and flaws. For postsocialist populaces like those who lived through socialism, its defeat is an unassailable conclusion. Their survival of socialism is what arguably renders the market so captivating. Indeed, the variations of time and place might differently inform the workings of market discourse; disparate contexts may alter its meanings. But only by comprehending the power of its story can the expan-

sion of individuals' real freedoms become a possibility. Most immediately, those under study can be empowered by equipping them with knowledge that enables them better to decide their own fates. And ultimately, new means of social transformation might be found that are more inclusive, not only across the CEE countries but around the globe as well.