

Claire Morelon

## Backlash against Democratization: Upholding the Social Order and Public Space in the Bohemian Lands, 1890-1914

This paper will analyse the backlash generated by the struggles for workers' increased political participation in the public sphere in the last decades of the Habsburg Empire. The period before the First World War was not only characterized by growing national conflict between Czechs and Germans in the Bohemian Lands, but also by numerous Social Democratic demonstrations and violent strikes. The massive demonstrations for the introduction of universal suffrage drew large crowds of tens of thousands of demonstrators in all the major towns of the Bohemian Lands. This movement and the strike wave in 1905-1906 showed the virulence of social conflicts at the time. The reaction to the unprecedented scale of protests in the Bohemian Lands in the wake of 1905 reflected the fears of the bourgeoisie that traditional structures of power could be undermined.

This paper will explore the mobilizing impact of the fear that working-class crowds inspired in the bourgeois classes. This fear made public space, main squares and streets, a major place to reclaim for the upholding of social order. Definitions of what public space meant before the First World War and who was entitled to its use had a highly charged political meaning. A democratizing polity meant that demonstrations were increasingly tolerated as part of the political process, but resistance to workers' participation in the public sphere was still strong.

Even if confrontations did always turn to violence, they revealed conflicting views on social order, from a will to challenge it, to striving to preserve it. The notion of social order used here corresponds to a representation of established social structures (property, titles, wealth, status, but also gender) and the accompanying threatened sense of certainty and stability.

The period immediately before the war witnessed a mobilization for the defence of order, in both the concrete sense of public order, but also in the more figurative sense of preserving the hierarchical organization of society.

The fact that workers invested public space during demonstrations, attacked non-strikers in front of factories or campaigned for Social Democratic candidates during elections were all grouped under the term “Social Democratic terrorism”. These practices all formed part of the growing confidence of workers in public space, which was linked to the movement of democratization and perceived as a danger to society. The paper traces the contested aspect of public space in towns across the Bohemian Lands, not through the lens of nationalist conflicts, but focusing on social tensions.

**Kontakt:**

[claire.morelon@unipd.it](mailto:claire.morelon@unipd.it)