

## PREFACE

While this book is a study of public and civic criticism, it was born from a curiosity regarding critical thinking as a social phenomenon.

During the first decade of the new millennium, goals of critical thinking have been increasingly prominent in US educational institutions. Miami University of Ohio, for instance, has prominently featured critical thinking as a principle of its Miami Plan for Liberal Education. As of 2006 the SUNY system required that students meet a basic competency in critical thinking. As a graduate-student instructor in anthropology at the University of Michigan, I took a workshop on encouraging critical thinking, just a few years after the College of Arts and Sciences had prompted faculty to address critical thinking in their syllabi. Employees of any US college or university could perform a search of their institution's website and likely find numerous documents claiming to address it. Much as literary theorist Michael Warner has noted a popular consensus on the virtues of critical reading, we might ask: what isn't there to like about critical thinking?<sup>1</sup>

Before I started teaching college students full-time in the United States, perhaps it was easier for me to miss such rhetoric. Yet before I began to hear and see it in the United States, from 1999 to 2001 I heard it and saw it used to describe a widespread social problem in post-Communist Slovakia, where I was conducting research. Critical thinking seemed to some Westerners there offering their expertise, particularly in matters of education, an apt term to describe patterns of thought that they were not perceiving in Slovak students, patterns crucial for making a democratic society take hold. Peace Corps projects promised to cultivate it. Other educational projects, particularly those that George Soros's Open Society Foundation sponsored, were sprinkled with claims to how they would advance it along with Slovakia's transition from state socialism.

One example was the Orava Foundation for Democratic Education, which spawned the international organization Reading and Writing

for Critical Thinking. Founded in 1991, in May 2002 the organization described its mission in the following way on its web page. It asked, “Why promote active learning and critical thinking?” An answer accompanied the question:

There are two reasons for promoting active learning and critical thinking in the schools of any part of the world. The first is political: active learning and critical thinking promote and sustain democratic citizenship and aid in the transition to open societies because schools that value these practices turn out citizens who think for themselves and can cooperate with others, even others different from themselves. The second is economic: active learning and critical thinking prepare people to be creative problem solvers, people who can contribute to their own well-being and thrive in jobs and workplaces that are just emerging or are still unforeseen.<sup>2</sup>

This statement was quite explicit in arguing that the socialization process taking place in schools has direct impact on the conduct of politics outside them. “Think[ing] for themselves” and an ability to “cooperate with others” were two measures given for the practice of “critical thinking” and “democratic citizenship” deemed necessary to facilitate Slovaks’ successful transition to parliamentary, liberal democracy and a market economy. By implication, Slovaks were missing these qualities.

Explicit or implicit, notions of thinking for oneself and cooperative engagement were circulating beyond this web page as elements of Slovaks’ discourses on themselves and of other observers’ discourses on Slovakia. Perhaps coinciding with the expansion of my social networks into the Slovak NGO and educational community, I began to notice foreigners from the educational, nonprofit, and governmental sectors using these phrases in conversation to summarize the challenge of Slovakia’s transition. By the time my interest was piqued sufficiently to want to write down this commentary on critical thinking, my use of the phrase as a question for Slovakia’s transition elicited interesting responses from the foreigners with whom I had contact. For instance, echoing one portion of the Orava Project’s statement, in the fall of 2002 one high-ranking representative of the US embassy lamented the Slovaks’ seeming inability to market their wines: Why couldn’t they make their labels more enticing? Why couldn’t they diversify their types of grapes? A few years later in 2005 I struck up a conversation at a church coffee hour in Bratislava with a middle-aged European American male who was teaching secondary school in the city. When I told him I was in Slovakia to study critical thinking and Slovakia’s transition to democracy, he replied, “I’m at the evangelical faculty and, boy, no one there knows how to think critically.”

After a brief pause, he continued, “Other than two people, that is, no one knows what critical thinking is. They have ‘the facts’ [putting his fingers up indicating quotation marks in the air], and they never stop to question the interpretation or where the facts are coming from. They just list these facts, and that’s it.”

These gentlemen were surely in part attempting to make agreeable, friendly conversation with me. But interestingly, rather than ask about my own framing of the topic, they presupposed that a quest to explain an absence of critical thinking must have motivated my interest in it. Their own suggestions of what was wrong, along with those of organizations like the Orava Project, reveal several suppositions about critical thought as a social phenomenon. First, democracy seemed systemically or functionally tied to cultivating critical thinking, just as the lingering of Slovakia’s undemocratic past in the present seemed a significant obstacle to overcoming an uncritical collective mentality. Second, what transpires in classrooms seemed directly productive of the country’s political order, be it democratic or something else. Third, to illustrate the absence of critical thought in Slovakia, these actors pointed to discursive practices, such as tendencies for students to excel at memorizing and recapitulating facts, but not knowing how to express their own views.

On the surface, the contours of this explication might seem obvious to many of my North American and Western European readers. After all, hadn’t the various national projects of state socialism across the region generally produced a party state that seemed to have either smothered critical discourse through the inculcation of fear or dulled critical thought through the control of information and dissemination of propaganda? While other details of life there might have been lesser known to Western observers, didn’t it make sense that the reproduction of such an alienating and hierarchical system would have been centered in pedagogical practices of discouraging students’ opinions and encouraging a regimentation of thought? Aren’t democratic states more likely to welcome critical thought as enriching the lives of their subjects?

While this diagnosis seemed intuitively right to me in some ways, in several others it was puzzling. I had never given much thought to what critical thinking was supposed to mean. Something about the term struck me as slippery and ill-defined in such lay usage. Moreover, I had actually taught at a secondary school in Slovakia from 1994 to 1996. While my personal journal from that period reveals my own perception that the school where I taught did not empower students to take initiative with their own projects, my students had impressed me with one type of criticality: they were well informed about current events within Slovakia and

beyond it and interrogated the doings of their political leaders and news media. Would US students and adults really demonstrate more critical thought, I wondered, at least in this one sense?

My skepticism toward these claims about critical thinking was bolstered by my training in linguistic anthropology and Eastern European studies that I had been undergoing as a graduate student, as well as a deeper intellectual interest in how the past influences the present. These claims of a widespread lack of critical thinking in Slovakia, after all, were grounded in perceptions of language use and notions of history. Yet studies in practices and ideologies of language in classrooms and public spheres had been arguing for years that interpretations of types of thought based on readings of others' language use are often problematic. Indeed, a closer look at Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking's and the European American gentleman's claims regarding critical thinking reveals a pattern that Judith Irvine and Susan Gal have argued underlies language ideologies of social difference.<sup>3</sup> First, these statements take discursive production or display as iconic of cognitive potential: they seem to assume that what students say or write represents the kinds of thought they are capable of producing. Second, these statements assume a tight recursive projection that the structure of speech events in classrooms has a direct effect on speaker roles in society; in other words, those students who only regurgitate their teachers' discourse will not later in life take initiative or engage in dialogue within public spheres. Third, and finally, these statements reflect a kind of view of classroom practice—common to pundits—from above: they erase factors that might both explain contextual behavior and potential structural similarities with their own implied point of comparison of schools in the United States.

Furthermore, emerging work on socialist Central Eastern Europe was revealing consistent evidence that the practice of voicing an opinion or criticizing something had not been influenced by politically stunted cognitive development, but by a complicated mix of sociocultural values regarding the utility of public criticism. For instance, recent historical scholarship on the Soviet Union during the Stalin period has documented how individual relationships to the state and party ideology, in a time and place that many Westerners equivocate with sheer political terror, were actually quite complex. Subjects of socialist states did not always disagree with the region's Communist parties over what they wanted for their lives.

It is also now clear from the triumphal proclamations of an "end of history" that followed the demise of state socialism that the West had defined

and still wanted to define itself structurally in opposition to a socialist or “totalitarian” East.<sup>4</sup> Western mobilization against Communism had relied on a fear of the totalitarian Other on the opposite side of the iron curtain. The use of such a binary opposition for self-definition was nothing new: “Western” Europe defined itself in relation to an “Eastern” half as far back as the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Western binary divisions of “civilized” versus “savage” societies are well-known in anthropological literature; early anthropologists themselves contributed to such discourses through the theoretical categories with which they organized their work. Attempts to locate civilizational difference in some kind of cultural essence or divine fate include more recent attempts to explain industrialized versus nonindustrialized societies in blanket terms of modernity or even orality and literacy. Discourses on critical thinking as a marker of a type of society can be bound intimately with such evolutionary schemata. After all, several twentieth-century theories of critical thinking (ones that inform the work of the NGOs I have mentioned) attempted to theorize practices of individual thought that contribute explicitly to democracy and thwart totalitarianism.<sup>6</sup>

All of these thoughts led to my deep skepticism toward using the term “critical thinking” to describe what a whole society, in this case post-socialist Slovakia, might lack. When I returned to Slovakia for fieldwork in September 2002, I expected to examine the role of Western agencies in promoting projects of critical thinking around the country and their criteria for the performance of critical thought in classrooms. I quickly discovered, however, that agencies such as the Peace Corps had pulled up their stakes, and others, such as the British Council or the Open Society Foundation, had reduced their presence. In *de facto* declarations of “mission accomplished,” they had left to toss seeds of democracy in fields of former Soviet central Asia less cultivated by the West. Yet Slovak laments of a national lack of critical thinking lingered, certainly in partial dialogue with foreign interlocutors, but also drawing on deeper ties to pan-European discourses. Those Slovak diagnoses, even if not always explicitly tagged as about critical thinking, pointed not only to discursive practices in classrooms but also more richly to patterns of public culture. That whole unexpected turn of events, a kind well-known in the annals of anthropological fieldwork, led me not to a study of development and technology transfer to Slovakia but to a deeper exploration of how socio-cultural dynamics form, empower, and limit knowledge and discursive acts critical of society.

This book, therefore, while launched by a curiosity in the social or public practice of critical thinking, is a study of the interrelationship

between politics, history, acts of criticism and voicing an opinion, socialization, and sociocultural knowledge. I hope that readers will agree with the broader relevance of this study in the anthropology of knowledge set in East Central Europe for how we conceptualize critical thinking as a social political practice in that imagined point of reference so present in Slovak social life during this period—the United States.