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### The location of critique

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/psc](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/psc)**Titus Stahl***University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

Due to my being a member of the ‘younger’ generation of attendants (although that is obviously relative), the historical development that other contributors to this issue reflect upon is not something I have personally experienced. When I started as a graduate student, ‘Prague’ always had been there and was the subject of conversation both among those who attended and those who did not attend. For me, it certainly felt that I now belonged to the field of critical theory when Rahel Jaeggi – who had supervised my MA thesis – encouraged me to come along to the conference in the Villa Lana in 2008. At that point, I was always aware that, each year, people came back from Prague, not only knowledgeable about the latest book manuscripts and ideas but also with interesting stories about controversies and alliances of an academic and non-academic nature.

Although I did not manage to go there every year after that, each time that I went there left an impression that cannot be compared with other conferences. I vividly remember talks by Maeve Cooke, Nancy Fraser, Hartmut Rosa, James Gordon Finlayson, Rainer Forst, Frank Michelman and others that gave me insights into debates that I sometimes did not even know existed. While I might have been able to get the content of what they presented another way, the unique atmosphere of that event – a combination of solidarity between members of a shared project, bound together by the theoretical commitment to philosophy as part of the movements aiming towards a more free and equal society, and uncompromising honesty and seriousness about the theoretical issues within that debate – is what made those occasions special. Many of the papers that I listened to were concerned about finding the ‘location of critique’ today, after the end of the grand historical narratives, although, in a literal sense, they had already found one such location by being in Prague!

I also vividly remember the first paper that I gave in Prague. Of course, it was not the paper that was special (a relatively boring summary of chapters of my PhD thesis), but the embedding in the conference. Before my talk, Nikolas Kompridis gave a lecture connected to his book *Critique and Disclosure*. In that book, he raises important

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objections to some choices that recent critical theorists have made. His lecture powerfully expressed these objections as well which – understandably – led to a quite heated discussion with the audience as some members felt they were the targets of his critique. When that session was over, the atmosphere was electrified, and I felt terribly nervous of having now to present something certainly much less exciting. Today, I hope that some of those present at least took my talk as an opportunity to relax after that very emotional session.

The spirit of solidarity and friendship informs not only the interactions within the conference proper but also the – perhaps even more important – interactions outside the official program. In the restaurants and pubs of Prague, many research projects are invented, friendships made and coalitions formed. I was lucky to receive very valuable advice in these contexts and, especially compared with other conferences, in Prague such advice is almost always given in a friendly spirit. This has enabled Prague to play an essential role for the academic community of critical theorists: not only to socialize younger researchers and allow them to understand the culture of their field, but to achieve that socialization based not on authoritarian respect for seniority and ‘rank’, but within a genuinely open practice of conversation.

As I cannot speak about the origins of the conference, perhaps there are a few remarks to be made concerning its future. Even though I was not able to come the last two years, I had the impression that the conference is torn between its increasing popularity (such a secret cannot stay one for ever) and the justified desire to keep the informal spirit and structure of the event. This may be the most important challenge that the conference faces. I do not have a solution for it myself, but I think that it is important not to rely too much on the self-limiting effects of an informal network which essentially excludes those people who are always missing from academic conferences. One solution may be to adopt a somewhat more formal procedure for the calls for papers and the paper selection process, even if this carries the danger of turning it into a more ‘normal’ conference. At the same time, the one precondition of the informal spirit – which makes Prague always feel like an event of liberation from the performance-driven anxieties of contemporary bureaucratic academic culture – namely the continuity of participation, must be preserved. Both aspects have to be balanced for Prague to continue to serve its function – namely to bring new generations of scholars into the conversation in critical theory. As we all know, today the preservation of what Horkheimer calls ‘critical activity’ – the analysis of the totality of society in the light of what it could be – is more important than ever.