The limits of thought
Academic censorship during Normalisation and its legacy[1]

LIBORA OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ

Professor of Sociology of Gender
Department of Sociology, University of Graz, Austria
e-mail: libora.oates-indruchova@uni-graz.at

This project has its beginnings in the mid-1990s when I began to teach at a Czech university and became acutely aware that my students who still studied from the same textbooks as I did in the 1980s, read those textbooks differently. They took the information in them at face value, gave importance to passages that I never even noticed, considering them as mere fillers with which the authors padded the text here and there to give it an appearance of ideological propriety. In short, I felt that, unlike my students, I possessed a "code" to the intended reading of these books and was concerned that the code was being lost and erased from memory with every student cohort. The general aim of this project was then to "save" or "retrieve" the code for posterity.

State-socialist countries differed in the ways and times, in which they exercised censorship of scholarship and science. Some, like Poland, had a formal censoring body, but specialist, low-circulation publications were exempt from the censoring oversight,[2] others, and post-1968 Czechoslovakia among them, had no formal or even legislative framework placing restrictions on publishing academic research. Censorship was abolished in Czechoslovakia in June 1968 and re-instituted by Act No. 127/1968 Coll. of 13 September 1968 (Zákon č. 127/1968 Sb. ze dne 13. září 1968 o některých přechodných opatřeních v oblasti tisku a ostatních hromadných informačních prostředků). The Act set the legislative framework for the establishment of the Bureau for Press and Information and the Slovak Bureau for Press and Information (Úřad pro tisk a informace/ÚTI, and Slovenský úřad pro tisk a informace/SÚTI). However, that law specifically exempted the results of scholarly

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1 Keynote presentation at the conference *100 let od založení KSČ. Dědictví československého komunismu* (100 Years Since the Founding of the KSČ. The Legacy of Czechoslovak Communism) organised by ÚSTR (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes), and ÚSD AV CR (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences) on 13., and 19.–21. May 2021. The ideas presented in this text are developed in greater detail in OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ, Libora: *Censorship in Czech and Hungarian Academic Publishing, 1969–89. Snakes and Ladders*. London – New York, Bloomsbury 2020. An earlier version of this paper was published as a screencast Academic Presses in Czechoslovakia and Hungary under Communist Regimes. *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 24. 3. 2021 – see https://trafo.hypotheses.org/27336 (quoted version dated 1. 11. 2021).

2 CURRY, Jane Leftwich (ed.): *The Black Book of Polish Censorship*. Vintage, New York 1984.

and scientific research from its scope. It goes without saying that particularly publishing in the social sciences and humanities was riddled with censorship pressures and measures. Any restrictions on scholarly creation in countries without formalized censorship had to be "dispersed" through various elements of the publishing process and "displaced" away from the oversight centre.[3]

Most of the works on state-socialist censorship have focused on the repressive actions of institutions against the creative spirit and tried to build taxonomies of state-socialist censorship.[4] These taxonomies describe how the state and its agencies acted on the writer and worked together as a system. In recent years some scholars drew on the theoretical insights of "New Censorship".[5] They take a less totalizing view of late state-socialist censorship, emphasizing complicity, resistance and negotiation[6] – which is also my approach.

In my research, I look at all stages of the writing process from the moment an author formulated an idea for a publishable text to that text's post-publication reception, as well as at a variety of actors participating in the process: the authors, their institutions and line managers, editors in the publishing houses, the peer reviewers and reviewers. The "self-perceptions" of the authors themselves stand in the centre of the inquiry, in order to examine the relationship of the author--scholar to his or her text and the reader. This leads to the examination of "agency and negotiations" of the creative actors, rather than their instrumentalization by censoring repressions of the state institutions.

My next question in designing the project was how to go about the retrieval of this possible "code": obviously, if the mere mention of the word "censorship" was censored (because, if officially research writing was not censored, how could such practice be even discussed?), written documents would be thin on the ground. In contrast, memories and experiences of academics active in state-socialist publishing houses and journals had been still relatively untapped in the early years of this millennium, when the research began, so oral history prevailed in the choice of method of data collection. In the end I used also two different archives to complement, or triangulate, whatever I gained through interviewing: science policies

3   BURT, Richard: (Un)Censoring in Detail. The Fetish of Censorship in the Early Modern Past and the Postmodern Present. In: POST, Robert C. (ed.): *Censorship and Silencing. Practices of Cultural Regulation*. Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles 1998, p. 17.
4   CHOLDIN, Marianna Tax: Russian Libraries and Readers after the Ice Age. *Libraries & Culture. A Journal of Library History*, 1998, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 26–33; BLIUM, Arlen: Censorship and Public Reading in Russia, 1870–1950. *Libraries & Culture. A Journal of Library History*, 1998, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 17–25; BLYUM, Arlen: *A Self-Administered Poison. The System and Functions of Soviet Censorship*. Legenda/European Humanities Research Centre – University of Oxford, Oxford 2003.
5   FRESHWATER, Helen: Towards a Redefinition of Censorship. In: MÜLLER, Beate (ed.): *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age. Critical Studies 22*. Rodopi, Amsterdam 2004.
6   JONES, Sara: *Complicity, Censorship and Criticism. Negotiating Space in the GDR Literary Sphere*. De Gruyter, Berlin 2011; SHERRY, Samantha: *Discourses of Regulation and Resistance. Censoring Translation in the Stalin and Khrushchev Era Soviet Union*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2015.

and Party propaganda concerning scholarship collected by Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute and housed in the Open Society Archives in Budapest, and holdings of the Editorial Board of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (Ediční rada Československé akademie věd/ČSAV) collected in the Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague and catalogued by Alena Míšková in 1990[7]. In both the data collection and its analysis, I drew on the steps of the grounded theory method.[8] The sample is saturated, that is, I continued data collection until no new theoretical information emerged.

Inextricably bound with the question "how" was the question, "who to talk to?". For several reasons I settled on the members of a very broadly conceived "grey zone"[9] intellectual elite: academics, who were neither in the dissent, nor among the leading lights of official academia – the "apparatchiks"; I chose people who published in state publishing houses and journals and/or taught at universities during the last two decades of state socialism (the so-called "Normalisation" in Czechoslovakia and late Kádárism in Hungary) and who were respected by their peers at the time of the interview for their work that they had already done in that earlier period. In short, people about whom one could say that their "loyalty" was primarily with their profession, rather than with with the Communist Party. What all of them shared was that at the time of the interview – that is, in the first decade of the new millennium – they enjoyed positions of seniority and respect in their disciplinary communities, most of them were professors, heads of departments, team leaders and prolific authors.

As I began to interview and, simultaneously, read theoretical literature on censorship, the core question crystalized: what was the end-effect of censorship in state--socialist publishing – did it motivate creativity and critical thinking in devising strategies to avoid acts of censorship and communicate one's ideas to the readers, or was it the exact opposite; did the constant checking against the potential censorial interference with one's text prove to be corrosive to creative and critical thinking and writing?

"Contradiction" seemed to be the defining feature of the oral history material: where one author gave one response to a question, another answered the exact opposite to the same question as to how the various mechanisms in state-socialist academic publishing worked. My job was to explain those contradictions. But: how to tell the overall story and preserve the contradictions and at the same time not

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7   MÍŠKOVÁ, Alena: Ediční rada ČSAV 1962–1989. Soupis dílčího archivního fondu (Editorial Board of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 1962–1989. The Inventory of the Archival Holdings). In: *Ediční rada ČSAV*. Archiv AV ČR, Praha 1990 (unpublished).

8   CHARMAZ, Kathy: *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis.* Sage, Los Angeles 2006; CORBIN, Juliet – STRAUSS, Anselm: *Basics of Qualitative Research. Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory.* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA 2015.

9   ŠIKLOVÁ, Jiřina: The "Gray Zone" and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia (September1989); Epilogue (1990). In: GOETZ-STANKIEWICZ, Marketa (ed.): *Good-bye, Samizdat. Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing.* Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Il. 1992.

to take a side with my narrative voice?

In the end, I decided to write the central part of the book in what has since become known as "post-academic writing"[10]: the kind of research writing that looks for unorthodox and creative ways of representing research findings. I developed a method of research writing that I called "imagined conversations" – with a bow to Benedict Anderson.[11]

The Czech scholars sit around an imaginary conference table, the Hungarians join in virtually, and they talk about the institutional environment, the personnel strategies in institutions and their own coping strategies in those institutions; they try to piece together a typical trajectory of an idea through institutions to publication and reception; they contemplate the relationship of authors to their texts and the very concept of authorship in state-socialist publishing; they try and recall the specific language use in scholarly texts of the time, as well as decide whether there, indeed, was some special "code" used by authors and understood by their readers, but inaccessible to censors, and finally, they reflect on the legacy of the past for the present and its continued relevance.

Three extracts from the "imagined conversations" are included below.

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In the first one, the narrators consider the relative effect of censorship and self--censorship and the degree of authorial control over the published text:[12]

"What do you think had a greater effect on the final shape of a text: censorship from outside or self-censorship?", I asked.

"I think it worked from both directions," Professor Lilius[13] responded. "External pressure, and then from that arose the self-censorship out of an urge to stave the pressure off somehow. By the end chapters of my second book there are clear signs of me wanting it to come out. It can't be helped when you'd been writing it for so many years, so you might sacrifice certain things – I don't mean any matters of principle – for it to be able to come out."

"We were a marginalized group, that was one thing," Professor Sinapis joined in. "For another, it really was a time when anybody who published things was afraid

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10   BADLEY, Graham Francis: Post-Academic Writing. Human Writing for Human Readers. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2019, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 180–191.

11   ANDERSON, Benedict: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London – New York 1991.

12   The remainder of the text is composed of passages from OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ, Libora: *Censorship in Czech and Hungarian Academic Publishing, 1969–89. Snakes and Ladders*. Here reprinted with permission of Bloomsbury Academic.

13   The narrators' nicknames are encoded: the first letter refers to the narrator's discipline (Editor, Historian, Literary scholar, Filosopher, Sociologist/Social Scientist), feminine names end in an "a". The script then informs on the narrators' generational categorization. Regular script marks the Generation 1968 – narrators who were already in the academic workforce at the time; they were born in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Hedera. The bearers of nicknames in CamelCase were students or postgraduates in 1968, and therefore, not in the academic workforce during the Prague Spring; they were born in the 1940s – for example, LoTus.

of getting into hot water. No matter that those editors, the women, might be ever so obliging and ever so kind, and convinced that it would come out, that it had to come out, they were afraid they'd find themselves in hot water. With articles it was a bit different, for example one article took about two years before it came out in a normal journal. I would insist I wasn't going to change anything. So gradually they got about eleven appraisals in and each time I refused and each time made my case for disagreeing. In the end a review was written by an ex-colleague who was embarrassed by the whole thing and who was quite high up, and he simply said, 'Yes, nothing needs changing', and the article appeared."

His response connected censorship with the core principle implied by "authorship": the authors' control over their own texts. Doctor ForSythia also made that connection, for she said, "When we submitted an article with the translation of a historical work from German, it had, in those days, to be approved by the head of department, and then the article appeared with his name first and mine second. I'd got my translation in it, and he'd written the preamble, which obviously had a political and ideological slant."

"Did you know what he was inserting?"

"Not at all! No. I handed the manuscript in and then it came out with his additions."

"Could anyone tell, in the article, who'd written what?"

"You could never tell. Up until '89 the system was ruled by a kind of vagueness that left everyone with a sense of guilt, without knowing what for. It was that Mao Tse--tung-like way of moulding broken-willed, good collaborators, see? You were always scared, but you didn't know what of. That's what it was like here."

"My boss also got me to write a whole array of texts for her and never ever put me down as their author," Doctor SiLena added to that experience. "She might be doing an article to send somewhere, so she'd have me write eight to ten pages as her source material, took it, used almost the whole thing, just titivating it a bit, then published it under her own name, and that was seen as normal. It used to rile me."

"So, your authorial power to decide about a manuscript was actually seriously curtailed," I ventured.

"Yes, invariably," Doctor ForSythia confirmed.[14]

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Unclear directives meant that every actor on the social side of the publishing process – the author, his or her superior, editors – guessed at and, occasionally, negotiated the boundaries of permissibility. It follows that any publication constituted a potential risk for all involved in terms of their professional future and further publication opportunities. Some manuscripts were sent for an ideological review, but the authors typically did not know that in advance and were not necessarily informed even after the fact. Indeed, if censorship officially did not exist,

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14 The extract as presented here was published in OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ, Libora: *Censorship in Czech and Hungarian Academic Publishing, 1969–89. Snakes and Ladders*, pp. 180–181.

a manuscript could hardly be rejected on political grounds and such rejection procedures lacked due process.

Inevitably, personal relationships took precedence over the professional standards of a review process. The need brought together groups of trusted friends and acquaintances that formed "gated" communities, publishing spaces designed to keep out outsiders. A shortage of resources[15] further exacerbated the importance of personal alliances. In short, written and unwritten rules, modified by exemptions and complications, regulated every step of a manuscript toward publication: who could write and publish and under what conditions, where and how often they published, who supervised the process, to whom and under what circumstances the regulations did not apply, and what the sanctions for transgressions were. The progress of an idea toward publication resembled a game of snakes and ladders, albeit with the researcher having a bit more agency than deciding whether to cast a die or not. One cast an idea into the institutional environment and its progress depended on whether it landed on a square with a ladder that helped it up to the next level of approval, or slithered down a level or two if it landed on a snake.

The publishing conditions kept changing over the two decades, spells of relative ideological relaxation alternated with ideological turns of the screw in response to the overall political situation, such as "perestroika" or activism around Charter 77. The scholars differed in the amount of personal experience with censorship. Most frequently, they listed examples of various forms of preventive censorship and self--censorship, less frequently post-publication censorship, and some even insisted that they had never been subject to any act of censorship.

Their reports of actual "textual" censorship, that is, that they would be told to remove this or that part of a text they authored were relatively rare. If they did occur, then usually as accounts of "friendly" censorship, a form of censorship halfway between preventive censorship and self-censorship. A colleague or the publisher's editor would "verbally" advise them to change the wording or some parts of the argument. Even then, the advice included additions rather than omissions to make the text politically palatable.

Authors were not entirely at the mercy of the system in resisting censorship. The lack of clear boundaries allowed for negotiation and varying interpretations. Authors, line managers and editors could then exercise agency as individuals, even if that agency took the form of self-censorship. The general awareness that constraints did exist made self-censorship pervasive, but also elusive, because it did not necessarily have to be conscious, but passed into the blood stream, so to speak.

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15 ŠMEJKALOVÁ, Jiřina: *Cold War Books in the "Other" Europe and What Came After*. Brill, Leiden – Boston 2011; ŠMEJKALOVÁ-STRICKLAND, Jiřina: Censoring Canons. Transitions and Prospects of Literary Institutions in Czechoslovakia. In: BURT, Richard (ed.): *The Administration of Aesthetics. Censorship, Political Criticism and the Public Sphere*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis – London 1994, pp. 195–215.

A good deal of self-censorship concerned the use of language.

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The second extract is from the chapter on the use of language: required, ideological use or the authors' preferred expressions. The authors conclude the discussion of concrete words and phrases with a more general reflection on the language of academic texts of Czech late socialism:

It was probably the sinister implications of Doctor Stellaria's reflections that prompted Doctor ForSythia to an even darker contemplation.

"I was always most afraid of people who simulated philosophy, who only knew the one ghastly version of Marxism that was used to explain things back then. They didn't know Hegel, they didn't know anything. And because they were only half-educated and knew very little, they were the most dangerous ones. Because they always framed the pressure they exerted in a colour scheme of political attacks, but sometimes it was simply that they were affronted by things they didn't understand."

"Language was pitched at two levels, which means there was considerable ambivalence as regards specialist language, because on the one hand it was perceived as being properly scientific, but on the other because the relevant guardians of ideology didn't understand it very well, so saw it as highly dangerous," Professor Sinapis confirmed that, indeed, linguistic sophistication could give offence to some in power.

"So, if there was talk of 'adaptation' [adaptace]*, they preferred to replace the word with something else, because what is 'adaptation' really? – Is it přizpůsobivost* [actually = adaptability] *or to do with adapting in moral terms, right? Those people immediately converted it into this kind of language."*

"One danger was fear of an excessive demand for not only conformist, but also accommodating terminology," Professor SorBus traced the obsessive picking over of words to its origin, fear. "Authors actually deriving it from the fifties, and that was where they were wrong. They dipped into fifties terminology either from defeatism, or for it to serve as a blanket under which they could retreat and enjoy private life. My feeling is that people often thought that more was not permitted than was permitted, because if you asked no questions and weren't conspicuously provocative, everything was all right."

Professor SalVia nodded understandingly and spoke in a low tone, "Human nature contains lots of positives and negatives and the instinct of self-preservation and an ability to justify everything conceivable to oneself may give rise to lots of things. That may even be the reason why I was genuinely afraid to join the Party. That it might do something to me that I wouldn't have wanted. And the seventies revealed in people's characters things that were doubtless there before, but our generation hadn't experienced them and didn't know them. We first encountered them after sixty-eight. That switching of opinions, people doing anything that was to their advantage. In the worse, the ethical sense, that's still with us. The seventies were kind of irksome,

dirty, weary. And also the fairly strong fear – though we needn't have had it."[16]

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There is perceptible anxiety regarding how to write something so that is gets published, but the Czech scholars reported much less frequent and less dramatic personal or second-hand experience with post-publication censorship than the Hungarian narrators. Yet some of their accounts were saturated with memories of fear, while the Hungarians often spoke of enjoying a considerable degree of academic freedom, despite having colleagues and friends who lost their jobs in retaliation for something they wrote or, in extreme instances, went to prison. The crux of this difference seems to lie in the far less systematic preventive censorship in Hungary than in Czech academia, where the foggy rules further exacerbated the anxiety. They kept everybody at all levels alert, even over-sensitized, to textual minutiae before a text was printed, so that post-publication censorship became almost superfluous. The pro-active censorship resulting from the guessing game of the hypothetical objections the reader at the next level might raise made everybody at different stages of the publishing process both a censor and censored and, consequently, inclined to censoring perhaps more than was necessary.

A side effect of this dynamic between mechanisms of surveillance and resistance was a destabilization of the category of authorship. The authors' control over their texts diminished and they themselves undermined the concept of an "author" by resorting to publishing under the anonymous "et al.", pen-names and allonyms (or "ghost-authoring").

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The last extract continues the discussion on language. This time I asked the participants of the imaginary symposium to reflect on their personal relationship to the language they used in their academic texts.

The caterers began to clear away the main course dishes. As we were waiting for the desserts, I invited my mentors to assess the overall use of the scholarly language with the hindsight of the intervening years.

I asked, "Do you think that this practice of using certain authorially preferred or, on the other hand, externally demanded phraseology was always a conscious act, or was it something that had passed so far into the bloodstream as not to register?"

"It was entirely conscious," Professor Sinapis said without hesitation. "In my student days I was incapable of accepting the world-view or ideology that existed. So, it may have passed into the bloodstream, but I think it was more a kind of indifference to the fact that such phrases were used. They were seen as more or less formal, empty things that were simply put there, like when you get a parcel it's wrapped in padding. Just padding that was of no importance, that got discarded anyway."

"It was a learning process for all of us," Professor Szebah confirmed that the sit-

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16   The extract as presented here was published in OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ, Libora: *Censorship in Czech and Hungarian Academic Publishing, 1969–89. Snakes and Ladders*, pp. 204–205.

uation was similar in Hungary. "It started in the secondary school: what is the way to describe things? You were socialized into that, and that was the way how you participated. One of the key features of the dissident literature and key aims of participating in underground activities was to learn a different language and to use a different language. Sometimes it was much less about the topic, it was just about how you address a topic."

She fell silent. Nobody else claimed the floor, so she continued, reflecting, "I thought about it a lot after the transition, about our language. One very effective tool to stop intellectuals from publishing was depriving them of their language."

"An 'amplifier of terror' didn't apply just to actual 'terrorists'," Professor SorBus *brought up his earlier metaphor, "but given how* [authors] *overused the phraseology, it's understandable this made others feel obliged to follow them. It created a benchmark. For a long time, I myself had scruples, but at the very end of that period I did use 'Marxist–Leninist'."*

"It occurred to me back then that the young generation was so fixated on music, so overrated the importance of musical expression, the language of music, because they were totally disillusioned, totally fed up with the abuse of language," Doctor Hyacintha offered. *"Because language had lost its credibility. They needed another medium to communicate with others and test whether they saw things the same way and understood one another. It seemed to me – and this still strikes me as basic to the woeful conditions of the eighties, despite 'glasnost' and everything – that language was being abused. Words had lost their authenticity, which was why the young generation were so attached to that non-verbal medium, that kind of communication."*[17]

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The need to write only on some subjects and in a particular way, by definition, produced a debate in the interviews around the possible existence of a certain "code" of communication between the author and the reader, or "Aesopian language". The implication is that "coding" honed critical reading and creativity. If the authors acknowledged that such practice existed at all, they tended to see its importance in imaginative literature and in poetry, but much less in scholarly writing. There, they conceded that perhaps it rested in "layering the text" (vrstevnatost textu) and in stylistics. The "layering" involved a complex textual strategy, creating a Bakhtinian dialogic text rich in intertextual references, which required that the reader was "in" and on the same wavelength.

The latter, the stylistic strategies, required that the reader was knowledgeable of a certain – and limited – vocabulary. She or he did not need "to decode" but "to translate", a fairly mechanical skill. Arguably, "translating" would have more likely led to decreased attention to the precise meanings of words, rather than to critical and creative thinking. This brings us to the answer to the question on the end

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17   The extract as presented here was published in Ibid., pp. 207–208.

effect of censorship. "Layering", a complex creative approach to producing coded meanings in a text, had a large potential for ambiguity in the process of decoding and, therefore, for communication failure in the academic environment, in which precision of meaning and understanding matters. Consequently, the situation in which the communication between the author and the reader fails and the failure is not compensated by another gain, such as cultivating critical reading and formulation skills, indicates that the effect of censorship is unequivocally detrimental – which begs the question of the legacy the state-socialist practices in scholarly publishing left behind.

Conclusion

An ideologically-based dualistic approach whether to research problems or to the interpretation of history has been a heavy burden of post-socialist scholarly and public discussions. One of the narrators went so far as to say that all that had happened after the fall of the communist regime was a reversal of whose voice was now legitimate and whose was not, but that the practices remained the same. If true, it could be at least partially explained by the post-socialist strength of the symbolism of oppression and resistance that left little space for the development of a greater variety of discourses. Another and logical part of the problem, however, lies in the defence mechanisms originally devised by the various actors to counter the political power: the importance of personal relationships, reluctance to describe processes of consequence in writing, smokescreen strategies, and sliding over the precise meanings of words. In post-socialism these may have become defence mechanisms of old actors in new positions of power against newcomers from the ranks of people, subjects, schools of thought, methodologies, or emergent publishing communities. Add to that a culture of insecurity and lack of clear rules as the operating environment and it will become apparent what obstacles may have stood in the way of a change toward a more open and merit-based system of scholarly research and publishing. A system that would benefit the production of knowledge first of all, rather than require that new authors continue to learn and play the game of snakes and ladders.