



Poznań, 2026.06.12

Review of the habilitation thesis by PhDr. Karel Altman, CSc.

**“The Heritage of Czech Tramping: Selected Chapters from the History
and Everyday Life of a Distinctive Phenomenon”, Prague 2024 (580 pages)**

In the introduction, the author emphasizes that his work is not historical in nature but ethnological, meaning that its primary focus is on everyday life and the practices associated with it. In this context, it is surprising to note that the first ethnological analysis devoted to tramping was published only in 1986. Altman himself published his first work on the subject in 1997. Beyond his publishing activities, the candidate also incorporated the topic of tramping into his teaching at the University of Brno, offering a lecture series entitled "Tramping as a Subculture". These efforts resulted in diploma theses focused on the subject as well as various museum initiatives.

The author argues that tramping is a uniquely Czech (and to a lesser extent Slovak) phenomenon, long-standing and particular in nature, having existed for over a century on the margins of legality—and thus subject to restrictions and repression, especially under the socialist regime. “The essence of tramping has always been and remains the free wandering through the countryside, camping, and the subsequent development of unique forms of leisure and entertainment in nature. (...) It also exhibits a range of specific attributes in the realm of material, spiritual, and social culture, of a higher quality, which justifies considering tramping a relatively distinct, characteristic, and specific lifestyle” (p. 60). This movement emerged spontaneously and from the grassroots; initially, such activities were referred to simply as "trips" or "hikes". The term "tramps" came into use in the 1920s. From the beginning, it was a youth-centered activity, practiced by young people from various social classes and backgrounds. According to Altman, it was an ethnically Czech subculture; young Germans did not participate, with the notable exception of a group of young Greeks. Each decade also brought its own leaders and well-known singer-songwriters associated with the movement.

Among the key reasons for the emergence of Czech tramping, Altman identifies romanticism, anti-modernist attitudes, the pursuit of relaxation (especially prevalent in the aftermath of World War I), a desire for direct knowledge of one's country, escape from urban life, and a fascination with the natural environment. Equally important was the mythologized vision of the Wild West, with two types of positively imagined heroes: Native Americans (chiefs, warriors), and law-abiding settlers (sheriffs, gunslingers, trappers). These models were introduced via popular novels and later films; as a result, tramps wore sombreros and "cowboy" hats, and their camps bore names reminiscent of the mythical American frontier. Another important influence was scouting in the United States, based on the program by Ernest Thompson Seton, as well as its British variant associated with Baden-Powell.

Altman focuses on the tramping subculture from 1918 to the present, with particular emphasis on its form and transformation after 1989. He identifies a wide range of primary sources, including chronicles, memoirs, posters, archival photographs, tramping magazines and zines (including samizdat), which can be interpreted as a form of autoethnography by members of the subculture.

While the existence of a distinct subcultural ethic and identity can be demonstrated, "tramping has never been, and still is not, a completely uniform or homogeneous phenomenon, though it has always maintained an internal structure composed of several relatively distinct types" (p. 104). One of the primary distinctions is between "wandering" and "settled" tramps, while others concern clothing styles, equipment, and attitudes toward alcohol consumption. Following the 1989 transformation, the subculture found itself—albeit somewhat unintentionally—on a collision course with environmental movements, supported by EU programs.

In reconstructing the tramps' "curriculum," Altman highlights the common age of initiation into the subculture, which usually occurred after completing primary school. Remarkably, many individuals continued practicing tramping until the end of their lives. Marriages within the subculture were frequent, often resulting in the enculturation of children into this lifestyle from a very early age.

A significant part of Altman's analysis focuses on the means of transportation used by tramps. The train held a central place—evoking cinematic and literary images and often referred to as "pacific." In earlier decades, hitchhiking and motorcycles (due to affordability) were popular, as were

boats. Walking, however, remained a universally cherished practice throughout all periods, consistent with the ethos of communion with nature.

The next segment of the description concentrates on the various forms of accommodation within the subculture. These included natural shelters (e.g., caves), semi-private and semi-public spaces (e.g., barns), and—quite predictably—sleeping under the open sky. Altman also discusses aspects such as methods of building fires, cooking, and camping practices. A separate chapter is devoted to the architecture of tramp-built shelters, with the most common being the bouda, srub, drevenica, and dača. The detailed analysis also includes descriptions of characteristic greeting gestures and phrases unique to the group. The author devotes considerable attention to the subculture's games and celebrations, both annual and spontaneous. The community term *potlach*—of ambiguous etymology—holds particular significance in this context.

Even this brief thematic overview of the reviewed monograph reveals its richness and breadth. According to the conclusion, the original manuscript exceeded 1,000 pages and had to be significantly shortened for publication.

There is no doubt that Karel Altman is an outstanding and exceptional expert in the field covered by the book. He has studied the Czech tramping subculture for many years, gathered archival materials, conducted independent field research (while inspiring others to do the same), and maintained active contact with members of this community. No one before him has attempted to produce an ethnographic monograph of this subculture encompassing its entire history and such a wide array of elements—material, ideological, and social. The result is a groundbreaking, highly informative work that presents Czech tramping as a distinctive, dynamic cultural formation. It is likely that *Dědictví českého trampingu. Vybrané kapitoly z historie a každodennosti svérázného fenoménu* will soon become a canonical source for future researchers.

However, the very strengths of the reviewed work are, paradoxically, also its weaknesses. Altman has produced a study of clearly descriptive character, to the detriment of its theoretical depth. The book does not engage with the longstanding international debate on subcultures (e.g., David Riesman, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, Sarah Thornton). This is particularly surprising given that the concept of subculture features in the title and constitutes a central term throughout. Greater analytical

insight could have been achieved by drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Jeremy Rifkin's "empathic communities", Michel Maffesoli's "affectual nebula", or Robert Owen Gardner's "portable communities". Similarly, it is disappointing that the author did not undertake a critical analysis of the characteristic cultural borrowings within the tramping subculture. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the construction of "totems" (cf. photos on pp. 71, 113, 312). Given the contemporary relevance of cultural appropriation debates, omitting this issue represents a significant oversight.

It might have been advisable to publish two separate books: one descriptive and popular-scientific, aimed at a broad audience, and the other analytical, drawing on anthropological literature and theoretical tools. By opting for a middle-ground solution, the author may have failed to fully realize the potential of either format.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Karel Altman's monograph is an original work, based on a diverse corpus of source materials and his own field research. The result is a monumental and highly detailed depiction of a specific social group, presented from both diachronic and multi-sited (George E. Marcus) perspectives. While the study is theoretically and conceptually modest, it is undeniably a major scholarly achievement that expands the existing body of knowledge and makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Czech cultural transformations. In my opinion, *Dědictví českého trampingu. Vybrané kapitoly z historie a každodennosti svérázného fenoménu* fully meets the criteria for habilitation.

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