



“Get Your Teeth Fixed Before You Go on TV”: Online Discussions of Reality Television as the Hegemonic Gaze Pointed at Socially Unacceptable “Others”¹

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ABSTRACT The article is engaged with the question of how viewers of Czech reality television programmes negotiate the social status of low-income participants in online discussions. The analysis is triggered by an enquiry into practices of stigmatisation and the processes of drawing, maintaining, and shifting boundaries between the normalised, well-ordered “self” and the poverty-stricken, socially unacceptable “other”. The public judgement of people lacking economic and cultural capital is analysed using Internet and social network debates related to the Czech adaptations of the reality TV programmes *Výměna manželek* (*Wife Swap*, TV Nova, 2005-present) and *Prostřeno* (*Come Dine with Me*, TV Prima, 2010-present). This method provides insight into the creation of consensual meaning, and allows the analysis of the positions, claims and arguments adopted by online discussants. The research outcome showed some important differences between the evaluations offered by the producers of programmes and those accepted by viewers.

KEYWORDS reality TV, shaming, low-income people, social class boundaries, Internet discussions, post-socialist society, Czech society, audience research

The continuing high popularity of reality television (RTV) on Czech television screens offers suitable terrain to see how the boundary is defined between the normalised, well-ordered “self” and the poverty-stricken, socially unacceptable “other”, a perspective which has been given only modest attention in Czech studies of television. Although a thoroughly researched topic in a global context, a focus on local variations of global formats, adapted according to the values and beliefs of the local population, is still missing in the Czech context. The research presented here examines viewers’ understandings of the depicted social positioning and social representations of socially disadvantaged participants in the two

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longest running RTV programmes to date: *Výměna manželek* (*Wife Swap*, TV Nova, aired since 2005) and *Prostřeno* (*Come Dine with Me*, TV Prima, aired since 2010), as reflected on the online discussion forums associated with the broadcasted programmes.

During the post-socialist transformation of Czech society, from a formerly classless one (based on small social differences) to a more openly stratified society, Czechs have had to gradually seek an understanding of the emerging social differences (Šafr 2008a: 13). In this ongoing process, RTV plays a substantial role, as it depicts the lifestyles of people from different social classes. This research is focused on the viewers' reactions following the depiction of people from deprived classes on RTV, as they are manifested in discussion forums related to these programmes. These forums offer an easily accessible platform, where people can discuss and negotiate their understanding of the proper tastes, behaviours and other habitual components of the acceptable "self" within a changing society.

Reality TV Programmes, Class and Shame

Many scholars (Hirdman 2015; Lyle 2008; Redden 2018; Skeggs, Thumim and Wood 2008; Stierstedt and Jakobsson 2017) conclude that RTV programmes (and primarily makeover shows) are in accordance with ideas of neoliberalism. The notion of aspirational consumption and the display of proper (and improper) cultural taste is the central theme of these shows, which are based on the normative rhetoric of individualisation, implying that now we can all become middle class by accruing the "correct" cultural, economic and moral capital through self-improvement. RTV is seen as an expression of neoliberal governmentality – instead of control from the outside, one ought to control herself, and is assisted to do so by various institutions, experts etc. (Ouellette and Hay 2008: 6; Skeggs and Wood 2012: 36).

The push that is needed to change a participant's life and behaviour is caused by taking them to another social environment, by showing them a different way of life, one that is often more positively evaluated by society than the participant's own (Skeggs, Thumim and Wood 2008). In this way, the lower-class participants, unable to live in compliance with the requisites of an exemplary middle-class family life, are shamed – via camera shots, through editing, and via co-contestants' remarks and the narrator's commentary. RTV thus teaches the audience about what behaviour is normal and what is deviant, by marking certain manners of participants as acceptable or unacceptable.

The mere act of watching the shaming programme confirms the audience's position as those who are part of the majority, those shaming, rather than shamed – and our empathy is weakened through watching repeated depictions of those behaving inappropriately (Hirdman 2015: 294). Lyle (2008: 320–322) described RTV as a bourgeois project preoccupied with self-improvement, based on the middle-class gaze – the ways in which the media operationalise the middle-class habitus, teaching the audience how to make middle-class "selves" by developing just the right forms of cultural, symbolic and economic capital. The middle-class gaze created by production techniques tries to evoke disgust in the viewer over the habits of the depicted working-class participants whose development of their own qualities is deemed to be insufficient. As a result, the opposition between the acceptable "self" and the socially unacceptable habitus of "others" is constructed by introducing extreme

characters: "Class struggles are constantly (re)produced through the acquisition and display of 'taste'" (Lyle 2008: 323).

As Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2017) showed in their quantitative research, working-class participants appear twice as often in RTV than in television in general, but "the genre does not give a voice to ordinary people" (p. 710). Skeggs and Wood (2012) based their research on interviews with viewers. Their findings are different to those drawn from textual analyses – instead of learning from television, the respondents took different positions according to their social background (pp. 214–222).

Individuals and groups interact in competition with each other in order to achieve a common, hegemonic view of the world. By establishing moral, socioeconomic, and cultural boundaries, they divide people into distinct groups and define membership within them, thus determining perceptions of who "we" are and who "they" are. Cultural characteristics and practices in particular serve to shape and define the identity of social classes, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) describes in his theory of cultural reproduction.

The tendency to othering groups with a different lifestyle was strongly observed in the research by Chase and Walker (2013), too. Those who are regularly working deprecate people who are claiming social benefits, and in the same way, people living on those benefits "distance themselves from the archetypal benefit claimant portrayed through the media" (Chase and Walker 2013: 749).

As Šanderová and Šmídová (2008: 8) describe, in the process of othering, the dominant group defines itself against the inferior group by recognising the basic categories and criteria of their affiliation, and similarly those in the inferior category do the same in order to gain membership in the dominant category. In RTV programmes, othering enables participants to direct the possible negative effects such as anxiety, contempt or disgust, which people want to reject in themselves, toward other participants, who are judged by viewers. This way, viewers separate themselves from participants by maintaining a superior position over them (Hirdman 2015: 292). "By striving to distance themselves from these humiliating and negative constructions of 'the poor', people appear to enter into processes of 'othering' through which they can vindicate themselves as valid social beings" (Chase and Walker 2013: 752).

Post-socialist Societies, Social Class and RTV Programmes

The outcomes of research presented so far are related to Western Europe and the United States. Although it has been about 30 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain, it is still reasonable to assume some differences exist between post-socialist states and Western European societies, especially as regards the social structure that communist governments attempted to transform during 40 years of domination. If we understand a social class as a cultural concept, "as an outcome of cultural representations, imaginations, and moral and affective economies among various social groups" (Petrović and Hofman 2017: 62), it is necessary to focus on a different class imagination within particular Eastern European states during the socialist and post-socialist eras.

Currently, some post-socialist countries such as Slovenia and Czechia are usually ranked among the most egalitarian countries in Europe (Eurostat 2019a, 2019b). In the post-socialist

societies, “the class and the separation of class cultures is both discursively repressed and historically weaker than in the European societies with traditionally stronger taxonomic boundaries between classes” (Luthar and Pušnik 2017: 83).

According to Luthar and Pušnik (2017), cultural distinctions are of great importance for those in the aspiring class as they help to demarcate the boundaries between classes. But reporting themselves generally to be middle class is probably an outcome of the egalitarian tradition, as people feel a necessity to differentiate themselves from the newly stigmatised lower class, in accordance with neoliberal aspirations (Luthar and Pušnik 2017: 86, 93). Respondents in several surveys usually identified with the group of ordinary, normal, or decent people, who see themselves as the majority in Czech society – average people, delineated by moral boundaries from those not included. This group includes blue-collar workers, the middle class, and some wealthy people as well (Vojtíšková 2008: 86).

Given the aforementioned differences between the Western and some of the more egalitarian Eastern European societies, what matters to society is not the distinction between the middle and working classes, but the boundary between the majority of society and those on the margins, the socially deprived. In the case of Czech society and popular RTV programmes, it is therefore appropriate to look for a fundamental societal distinction not between the middle and the working classes, but between the majority of well-ordered citizens claiming to be normal and the deprived or precariat class – people with low levels of economic, cultural and symbolic capital. I therefore propose to modify Lyle’s concept of the middle-class gaze as the hegemonic gaze. As I will show later, is the latter that is fully utilised by online discussants, and it is also partly integrated by RTV programmes in order to meet the expectations and needs of their popular audience, although producers are, for the most part, following an imported original format of the programme.

Online Discussion Forums as a Source of Popular Discourse

In the digital era, various Internet discussion forums, social media debates, and comments on websites feed into the popular discourse. It is a kind of discourse that is not moderated by the mainstream mass media, but is instead spread largely by word of mouth, through the non-mainstream media or through online discussions (Daniel and Machek 2015: 73). Howard (2008) describes it as the “vernacular web” in order to distinguish such content from institutional discourse: “The vernacular web emerges in specific network locations as a communal invocation of alternate authority” (Howard 2008: 192). The vernacular character expresses two different kinds of authority: one that is mainstream, in which they discuss, and their own. “Seeking alternatives to the institution, the vernacular often opens authority to the heteroglossia of the community” (Howard 2008: 206). Mikhailova (2011) considers online discussions to be sources of non-elite public debates. The immediate reactions of dozens or even hundreds of readers represent the general attitudes and perceptions of participants (Mikhailova 2011: 525) who adopt a variety of subject positions (Lin and Tong 2009: 289). Contributions “provoke new and often more detailed responses, which may clarify the thinking about an issue in groups, more effectively than in individual interviews” (Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner 2012: 56).

As many scholars demonstrate (Lin and Tong 2009; Luscombe, Walby and Lippert 2017; Mikhailova 2011; Xu 2012), online discussions serve as a natural environment for twenty-first century non-elite public debate. They enable discussants to continuously select, construct and negotiate their identities. In doing so, participants in various forums and sites cooperate in continuously constructing and delimitating "self" and "other". Online discussions are gradually becoming a place where all societal norms and problems are increasingly being negotiated, mainly for those who are not satisfied with the official discourse distributed by the mainstream media.

Online discussion in various formats represents a distinctive and easily accessible resource for analysing popular opinions, attitudes and views; it is a record of the continuous creation, reshaping and reinforcement of the popular discourse. Certainly, there are some important differences from face-to-face communication. Instead of using real names, people tend to write under nicknames or fake names, and we miss the relevant socio-demographic data about them, apart from the identity they present online. But the presented identity is also part of their promotion of ideas and attitudes, e.g. a commentary written by someone describing himself as a worker is meant to be regarded as a worker's opinion. Participants also tend to adhere to more extreme and aggressive statements or enjoy trolling, but this is a common and already integral part of the virtual public agora nowadays, and participants are taking part in lively debates with knowledge of all these circumstances (Daniel and Machek 2015: 75–76). According to Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner (2012: 56), existing research shows that to a large degree, users of Internet forums express their own attitudes even if they often do this in an aggressive manner.

Analytical Approach and Method

My analysis of selected online debates was based on ethnographic content analysis (Altheide et al. 2013) that I find especially useful to analyse online debates. It conceptualises document analysis as a form of ethnographical fieldwork, which is useful if we want to study patterns of human action in text and other documents to show how these reflect various aspects of culture. It focuses primarily on context, process and the emergence of meanings. The aim is to develop an analytical construct that can be applied to the studied materials through recursive and reflexive movement between concept, data collection and interpretation of the data. The investigator should be systematic and analytic but not rigid: "Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study" (Altheide et al. 2013: 26).

For this study, the data were scraped from the web pages of the Czech RTV programmes *Výměna manželek*² and *Prostřeno*³, official Facebook discussions of these programmes⁴, discussions on the popular Internet news server *Idnes.cz*⁵, and a specialised discussion

2 <https://tn.nova.cz/tema/4822-vymena-manzelek>

3 <https://prima.iprima.cz/prostreno/soutezici>

4 <https://www.facebook.com/vymenamanzelek/>; <https://www.facebook.com/FTVPrimaProstreno/>

5 <https://www.idnes.cz/revue/spolecnost/vymena-manzelek.K45015>

forum focused on RTV, *Panáček v reality show* (“Puppet in RTV Programmes”)⁶ using the Import extraction tool. In order to study the discussions about low income, poverty-stricken people, I chose several keywords to indicate discussions about participants with the desired profile and episodes with suitable plots. Among them were words indicating poor, poverty and debt collection, using both formal and colloquial expressions if they exist. This way, I obtained a set of 64 discussions with a higher incidence of the mentioned keywords. For the analysis, I randomly selected half of them to be representative of the occurrence of particular keywords, as well as all discussion forums and both programmes. The discussions contained between a few hundred to almost sixteen thousand posts. Subsequently, from those I selected the first and last 300 posts from every discussion (and 500 from the longest ones on *Idnes.cz* covering the whole series rather than particular episodes). This way I finally obtained about 20,000 posts. It is necessary to point out that a predominant part of the selected posts were offensive, vulgar, without arguments and aimed at other discussants rather than at the programme itself. Many posts consisted only of vulgar shouts and insults. Contributions to the studied topics were a minority – it was possible to code about 1,000 posts out of 20,000 selected (some of them with more than one code).

I then analysed the selected data to understand narrative, positions, claims and arguments adopted by online discussants to express their views about the depicted stories and characters, focusing on low-income people and their inability to reach the required normative ideal of family and personal life. To better understand the discovered discrepancies, I supplemented my research with a close reading of one episode of *Výměna manželek*, which I compared with the related discussions.

Poverty-stricken People on Czech Reality TV Programmes

Czech RTV programmes such as *Výměna manželek* and *Prostřeno* predominantly offer a view of the extremes of family or individual life, focused on weird, bizarre people, troubled families and people with poor hygiene and who are unable to cook.⁷ They are mostly following the original pattern described by Lyle as the middle-class gaze, but the viewers’ understanding differs in accordance with a different class imagination that is specific to Czech society. Programmes focused on households of people who, according to the narrative of the show, do not care about hygiene and cleanliness, are repeatedly the best means of provoking the interest of the audience. The depiction not only shows participants who are unable to reach a better social status due to their own mistakes and unwillingness to change,

⁶ <http://reality-show.panacek.com/vymena-manzelek/>

⁷ I left out other important issues of gender roles as well as the racism that was frequent in the analysed discussions, as a topic for another research project. The preferred gender roles are predominantly strictly traditional. Anti-Roma racism is more related to questions of class and poverty – while the programmes are relatively cautious in the case of Roma participants, persons living in disorder or on benefits are sometimes called “white Roma” by debaters, and conversely, Roma families who meet the middle-class emphasis on work, effort and cleanliness are seen as a positive exception. The effort of debaters to label unsympathetic characters as Roma is also strong.

but their counterparts as well, who are able to follow instructions and live in accordance with middle-class fantasies about exemplary lives in ideal households while successfully bringing up children.

The construction of the programmes for self-improvement through the acquisition of a middle-class habitus and aspirational consumption, and at the same time the inability of participants from socially disadvantaged groups to adapt to these requirements, can be seen in an episode of *Výměna manželek* (S07E10). One of the participants, nicknamed "messy Věra" by the public, became infamous even among those who do not watch RTV regularly. The wives were exchanged between two families whose members worked in blue-collar positions, but who were presented in very different ways in the introduction at the beginning of the episode. The camera shots showed on one side a family where the wife had two jobs to pay a mortgage for a large country log house with a big garden and to maintain an acceptable standard of living. This perfectly organised family kept the house tidy and, besides the constant work on the property and in the home, actively spent leisure time hiking outdoors. The family is depicted as convenient to middle-class habitus, leading an aspirational lifestyle to accrue the "correct" cultural, economic and moral capital through self-improvement, as is shown when the swapped wife immediately begins to reorganise the other household: she washes the dirty laundry, takes the children to the doctor, buys toiletries and cleaning supplies etc. Hence the family is depicted as a good example of how people can actively change their life and live in accordance with the normative middle-class ideal, even if their education and skills at work are insufficient to earn wages adequate to those standards.

On the other side, there was the family of Věra, who lives in social housing, in a cheap residential hotel. There are two adults and two children in one room with shared household equipment. According to the narrators, the mother Věra took her older daughter as early as possible to kindergarten to have peace at home so she could play computer games. Gradually we discover dirt throughout the room, and inadequate personal hygiene and childcare. The impossibility for Věra to change is repeatedly demonstrated when she – as the swapped wife in a new family – refuses to take part in everyday work and cleaning in the household. She is bored on a family walk through the forest and suffers without a tablet. Věra is thus presented as a person who is not only responsible for her own dismal situation, which could be excused by growing up outside a family environment in an orphanage – but she is depicted as not being able to take advantage of the new situation in an economically more secure family because of her innate character.

A normative view offered by popular RTV is based on the repeated depiction of good and bad families and individuals, and the programme regularly establishes a dividing line between them; in fact, between "us" and "them", based on sets of characteristics separating the middle-class habitus from those deprived people who lack it. According to these programmes, the normative middle-class habitus is based on (and easily recognised by) a basic sets of characteristics. The more or less successful families and individuals are of middle-class and aspirational working-class backgrounds. Their counterpart is regularly played by deprived families. Their members are described by all means of audiovisual

techniques as idle, unwilling to work and are depicted as passive overall, with a lack of interest in any personal improvement and dependent on social benefits.⁸

The audience is thus confronted with a clear dichotomy dividing the participants into positive and negative groups. Episodes are built on the creation of social distance between ourselves and the people portrayed as living in poor environments, who are depicted as not like us. The dichotomy based on distinctions in tastes, consumption and behaviour followed regularly by producers is shown in the following comparison:

passivity	vs.	activity
old furnishings from socialist times	vs.	modern furniture
outdated	vs.	stylish fashion
dirty	vs.	clean households
lack of hygiene	vs.	health care
unkempt personal appearance	vs.	self-care (proper haircut, healthy white teeth, plastic surgery)
unhealthy food	vs.	complex food
passive entertainment	vs.	sporting activities
smoking, alcohol and drug abuse	vs.	healthy lifestyle

Of course, the individual participants are not strictly divided black-and-white according to this axis; these are rather the positive and negative characteristics that are attributed to the individual performers in the narrative of each episode. But this basic division mostly epitomises the main didactic message, not only about good and bad taste, and behaviour, but also about what is accepted as normal and what is seen as deviant (as represented by the media). These readings are offered regularly by RTV programmes, but there remains the question of whether and how viewers approach them.

How Audiences Come to Dislike Participants: Disordered Homes and Lives

The vast majority of analysed posts in online discussions were condemnatory, criticising the participants for their actions; only a minority contained positive messages, appreciating their characters or behaviour. Less frequently occurring was negotiation showing that participants' actions can be seen in a better light than as by most of the debaters. I will deal with the individual codes in order of the frequency of their occurrence in the research sample.

Complaints about living on social benefits dominated, and usually participants saw poverty-stricken participants as “parasites”. They are accused of getting money from the state for nothing, while the debaters must work hard and pay taxes: “With my taxes, I contribute not only to my current pension, but also to the abundantly reproducing trash, whose children follow in the footsteps of their parents” (idnes.cz). Some discussants expressed it as a personal problem of the participants, citing their laziness and unwillingness to work, while others saw this as a mistake of the state, which offers this option, so it is worthwhile to live on benefits rather than work. As both Šafr (2008b: 72) and Vojtíšková (2008: 87, 133)

⁸ For a more detailed content analysis of Czech RTV programmes, see Reifová 2020.

found in their research among the Czech population, the former quantitative and the latter qualitative, the valuing of work and maintaining a long distance from those who do not want to work is a universally applicable and strongly normative viewpoint of the Czech population as well as an important part of group identity, which clearly delegitimises those who are not in line with it. Their identity and self-esteem are based on crossing the border into the world of the "normal".

The interpretive work trying to weaken the condemnation of the majority of debaters took place along two lines. Some pointed out that after taking into account the number of people in a household, benefits are in fact quite a small amount of money, and that everyone is entitled to them. Others explained that participants could also work illicitly so as not to lose benefits or to hide earned money from debt collectors.

Criticisms of the disorder in homes (which is perceived as the main characteristic of these shows) and the upbringing of children were significantly less frequent than posts related to social benefits. Untidiness is perceived as a direct result of laziness as well as bad social habits; it should not be shown publicly on TV. It is perceived as an example of being unaccustomed to the middle-class habit of tidying up when you invite visitors: "What I don't understand that they are able to present their dunghill and dirt on TV, or they are not ashamed to invite a visitor to the shambles. I would be ashamed to go out" (nova.cz).

The maintenance of order in the household is questioned only exceptionally, pointing out that with more children it is impossible to keep the household fully clean. The only significant exception was an episode with a rich, extremely orderly family. On this one occasion, probably as part of the rejection of the overly ostentatious life of this well-to-do family, the discussants asserted that order and cleanliness should not be overemphasised, and that time for children and good family relations is more important. But such arguments appear only in relation to this single episode. The aversion to the family presenting their wealth is probably due to both the rejection of the *nouveaux-riches* (Kolářová and Vojtíšková 2008: 70) and because of the ideal of false modesty, as described by Šafr as a consequence of Czech egalitarianism strengthened during the period of socialism by an effort to keep a low profile and an unwillingness to step out of line (2008a: 89).

Domestic disorder is most reproached if children live in a messy apartment. Discussants then often call on social workers to intervene and take the children away from the family. Concern for children and their upbringing is as frequent a topic of criticism as disorder. It is very common for discussants to argue that the children will learn bad habits and reproduce the lifestyle of the poor, which causes their poverty: "Of course, I feel sorry for their children, they grow up in such an environment and unfortunately will be like their parents" (nova.cz). This criticising of families for having too many children who have to be supported by the state corresponds to the notion of the culture of poverty (Lewis 1959) as described by anthropologists, and although the concept has been largely refuted, it survives, as we see, in popular discourse. On the contrary, children's satisfaction and love in the family are appreciated.

There is a significant paradox here, most pronounced in the case of children taking on the characteristics and destiny of their parents, but also appearing partly among other topics, especially when it comes to the meaning of social intervention. The behaviour promoted

by the neoliberal discourse, such as striving for constant self-improvement, working on oneself, which leads to success in society, has a limited reach from the point of view of the discussants and does not apply to many socially deprived people, who are not capable of improvement, and efforts to help them are fruitless or even pointless. This view resembles that of racist attitudes towards the Roma and other ethnic minorities, but applies to a limited extent to all the socially deprived. It helps to draw a stronger line between those who are capable of improvement and therefore potentially part of the collective “us”, and those who are not, and therefore cannot be part of us.

The Main Sin of Performers: Laziness

Messy households and a lack of interest in education are naturally related to the laziness of participants, as the laziness serves as a floating signifier with multiple manifestations. In the view of discussants, laziness is the main characteristic of these individuals’ personalities, and the greatest part of their defects is rooted in it. The direct mention of laziness as such is the second most frequent group of codes, together with debaters’ remarks on participants’ appearance and overall ill-breeding.

Largely, only women are shamed for their appearance. In order of frequency, the most annoying characteristics for debaters are obesity, looking older, hairstyle, physical imperfections (bad teeth), and fashion sense and style: “The girls couldn’t match him, especially the fat blonde with the would-be hairdresser with a red thatch of hair, and ugly teeth, ugh!!” In any case, appearance is something that the socially acceptable person ought to work on, instead of insulting others by looking bad: “Maybe Mila can pay for new teeth to be made. A young woman with such teeth, that’s disgusting” (nova.cz). But of course, behind the expression of disgust, there is a reference to deficient cultural knowledge, as an aspect of class habitus, about what is the right kind of personal appearance and how to achieve it.

Furthermore, the lower-class participants are criticised for their aggression, anger and vulgarity, while a reasonable individual should be able to keep them under control. This corresponds with the middle-class anxiety about members of the working class who are seen as uncultivated, animal-like and as a pathological, abject other (Lyle 2008: 320). There are also much-criticised participants who act superior to others. On the contrary, modesty is appreciated; the inconspicuousness of an ordinary person who does not pretend to be someone else: “Cut hair to a bob, [cut] the fringe, [put] oily skin powder in your bag, lose weight, don’t envy the slim and handsome, don’t look for faults in others, especially where there are none. Count to ten before you say anything, dress more tastefully, and then maybe you’ll be tolerable” (iprima.cz). This can be quite clearly perceived as a dimension of the idealised middle-class role as observed by Šafr (2008a: 89) – not to deviate from the average, not to rise above others, and to keep one’s behaviour under control. Vojtíšková (2008: 86) noted, too, that an important virtue for her respondents was “do not pretend to be someone else” and do not show off.

The topics of addictive substances (alcohol, cigarettes and illegal drugs) and cooking had medium values of occurrence (paradoxically, given that cooking is the main theme

of the show *Prostřeno*). The topic of legal drugs is clearly associated with a lack of self-control and irrational economic behaviour. The main argument is that poor families have little money, live on our taxes and spend money on cigarettes, instead of investing in their children, housing or personal appearance: "Their selfish and lazy parents, instead of buying them quality food or having their teeth repaired, they just smoke and do nothing" (nova.cz). Significantly for Czech society, alcohol consumption is less annoying than cigarettes. Although excessive drinking is criticised, the spending of money on it is not. The discussants also highlight the occurrence of children in families where parents smoke in the flat, and adolescent smoking. Regarding cooking, unhealthy food for children and canned food are criticised the most. But there is also a struggle between the supporters of Czech traditional meaty cuisine, and the supporters of international, light and healthy cuisine. The former is criticised by some for being outdated and unhealthy, while others argue the latter is snobbish and not to be eaten.

The remaining codes have a rather random occurrence, often related to a specific episode. As can be seen from the comments, negotiating and positive comments are likely written by discussants who have a habitus close to the participants, but the low incidence of these non-negative comments suggests that most discussants feel the need to define their cultural capital against poorer participants. They show their awareness of what participants are doing wrong, and in the discussions they also often demonstrate the better, more conscientious practices of their own households (higher income, better upbringing, more capable children, knowledge of "real" brands, younger look and care for their own appearance): "My daughters and I shave [our hair], you won't find a hair on us..." (nova.cz). As Šanderová and Šmídová (2006: 8) describe, those in the dominant group distance themselves from others in their category by denouncing them and elevating themselves above others in the process of othering.

The Audience's Re-drawing of Boundaries – Non-class-Based Differences

As the analysis of the online debates shows, only some of the dichotomies mentioned directly or indirectly in RTV programmes are generally accepted by discussants as dividing society into the majority "self" and the ostracised "others". Other differences highlighted by RTV are negotiated or rejected in discussions. In the following quotation, the debater makes a circumspect attempt to disagree with the positive and negative depictions of participants in the programme and tries to find out the opinion of others, to begin negotiations on offered meanings: "Girls, what do you say about the swap yesterday ... I somehow, I do not know how Monika played the star and she was no great shakes at home – too much mouldy butter, and the clothes were terribly crumpled etc. I do not know I probably found the other family nicer" (facebook.com).

Although these dichotomies are ardently debated too, they remain acceptable within the society, and they are not used to separate their bearers from the idealised middle class niveau. The debaters do not refuse the othering in principle, they instead redraw the boundaries according to beliefs seen as common to them all (and negotiated in discussions). The boundaries actually accepted or redrawn by debaters can be divided into three

categories: class-based, non-class-based, and boundaries separating phenomena seen as entirely alien from the dominant “national” culture.⁹

There is a bundle of attributes which are debated but eventually rejected as possible touchstones for “normal” majority for the othering and exclusion of the bearers of these attributes. Attributes which are **not based on class** – such as old age or rural origins – represent one such group. Members of these groups take part in Internet discussions on these topics, and although their discussion is often feverish, it predominantly does not lead to the conclusion (by either party) that these non-class criteria exclude participants from the majority of “normal” people. These debated, criticised and ridiculed features of RTV participants’ behaviour, customs, preferences and tastes are related to the perceived dichotomy expressed in terms of the traditional conservativeness of some parts of Czech society (perceived as belonging to the rather older and rural populations) and the cosmopolitan progressiveness of others (perceived predominantly as the young urban population), but these characteristics are not necessarily tied only to villagers or city dwellers respectively.

Another dividing line which is not employed by the discussants as a reason for stigmatisation and exclusion is food preference (with some exceptions discussed below). One side prefers traditional Czech cuisine with meaty food and high fat, whereas the other side favours fashionable exotic “modern” cuisine, based on light food with more vegetables.

Internet comments on topics that are not perceived as exclusionary largely have a different nature from those comments on the qualities, behaviour and tastes of participants who are perceived as not part of “us”. The participants who are considered part of the majority are also mocked, and the discussions about them are full of mutual teasing and disgusting attacks among the debaters, but generally acts as a form of criticism of the bad habits that occur among people in our society, pushing each other to entertain themselves – knowing that ridiculing these differences will provoke an angry response from supporters of other values and behaviours. But this is seen only as a distraction among the majority, in part because it is engaged in by supporters of both sides. It is therefore part of an amusing, though aggressive game, typical of Internet discussions.

The difference between the characteristics of participants that do not exclude them from the majority of “normal” people with acceptable habits, and those characteristics that lead to expulsion from “us”, can be demonstrated in an episode of *Výměna manželek* (S11E05). In this episode, the narrative about good and bad participants offered by the programme is largely accepted by discussants. A household in which the swapped wife discovered expired food, dust covering rooms and furniture, and even mouse droppings in breadcrumbs, is of course considered highly disgusting by Internet discussants. But contrary to the above-mentioned episode about messy Věra, the family living in such dirty conditions is not condemned by the majority, as other characteristics of their household and habits do not exclude them from the normative ideal of the majority.

In this case, the family with mouse droppings in breadcrumbs are not defined as untidy social outcasts – they are renovating their own house, so they are assessed by debaters

⁹ For this idea I want to thank my colleague Irena Reifová.

as active and aspiring. A majority of the discussants thus voice various explanations and apologies for the living conditions of the family. The dirt is mostly explained as caused by the construction work, and mice are seen as common in the countryside: "I have to admit, the young ones from the ruined house I found nice. ... Yes, there was a mess, but it was a construction site and even the other family did not live better" (idnes.cz).

Class-based Differences

On the other hand, there are behaviours and qualities considered inappropriate in society, not corresponding with the ideals of middle-class normativity. They have almost no advocates in the discussions, with rare exceptions. These **class-based differences** are automatically perceived as characteristics that any reasonable person cannot accept, perceived by common sense to be clearly inappropriate and thus automatically rejected. Shaming of these qualities and their holders is not performed to provoke a hot debate, but as a kind of ritual condemnation, as it is not expected that any normal person (i.e. a member of the majority) could take the opposite view. The condemnation of characteristics perceived as typical for alternative or marginalised social groups serves rather as a kind of confirmation of the discussant's membership within the normalised majority, to confirm that the shaming person possesses the right cultural (middle-class) capital, and thus their condemnation serves to fundamentally distinguish themselves from those who do not belong to the majority. This is particularly important for those who are positioned close to the dividing line and who in this way attempt to consolidate their belonging that could otherwise be easily called into question (Chase and Walker 2013: 749; Luthar and Pušnik 2017: 93; Šafr 2008c: 17). This condemnation is related to socially deprived people, the shaming of whom is not so much about their habits, but their general lifestyle seen as passive: "Antisocials, junkies, pigs, really disgusting" (*panacek.com*).

In the same way, the above-mentioned, ostentatiously rich, extremely orderly family is also condemned. The other, more ordinary, more average family wins out in the negotiations between money and luxury and excessive order on one side, and friendly upbringing of children in relative poverty and partial disorder on the other side. In this case, discussants expressed shared values of Czech commonness, modesty and emphasis on children, to demarcate themselves against the higher-class or rather *nouveaux-riches* participants.

If the depicted family has an unclear social status, as in the case of a family who although living on benefits resided in their own house with a mortgage, the appraisals differ considerably. On the one hand, they are blamed for snobbery and bad taste, but on the other, debaters praise their independence and their achieved social level – the latter are often those who mention that they are in a similar situation. Thus, in this case the boundary is unclear, and negotiations do not reach any consensus.

Aliens to Local Culture

In addition to the already mentioned re-drawings of boundaries related to the social class of the judged participants, there is one more, specific reason for dismissing some programmes'

participants. It reflects aversion to what is seen as foreign, extraneous and obscure rather than condemnation of either uncivilised scum or snobbish upstarts. While class-based shaming and stigmatisation follows the low vs. high hierarchy, dismissal of what might be called **the alien others** brings a new dimension of outside vs. inside into the rationality of exclusion as performed in the online discussions. It is mainly participants whose lifestyles are rooted in vegetarian or vegan food preferences, and those who shun alcoholic beverages, who are classified as not in line with genuine, heartfelt Czechness. Exclusion based on ethnicity and religion, although intentionally left out of this analysis, would also fall into this category.

These universally sanctioned and strongly expressed rejections indicate a strong dislike for alien identities and lifestyles, which are perceived as incomprehensible and even threatening to national culture. It is different to class-based rejection, as participants that are seen as of a different social background (whether underclass or too affluent) are generally rejected in discussions, but their existence is perceived as necessary and understandable in contemporary capitalist society (as a kind of necessary evil). So they are excluded from the middle class-like normative niveau, but not from Czech society in general, contrary to those seen as alien to national culture.

Conclusion: Hegemony of the Czech Normalised Middle-class Normative Ideal

In the course of the post-socialist transformation, cultural distinctions between the newly emergent classes developed only gradually and the boundaries between the corresponding habitus remain unclear.¹⁰ This situation results in strong efforts by individuals to emphasise one's own cultural difference from those below, in order to get closer to the middle-class normative ideal, to be part of the shared societal norm. The appropriate means to do this is to demonstrate knowledge of the right taste, behaviour and other habitual components by shaming those who are clearly and at first sight lacking both economic and cultural capital – people from the deprived classes. RTV programmes and related Internet discussion forums thus offer an easily accessible platform where people can publicly and regularly shift the limits between the acceptable “self” and the bad, anti-social “other”. But the analysis presented here showed that debaters are largely redrawing the boundaries set by the RTV programmes in order to adapt them to their own values and beliefs. This way, in the process of watching and discussing highly popular RTV programmes, a new hegemonic consensus is negotiated.

In the online discussions, we can distinguish three main types of criticised behaviour and presentations of participants: non-class-based, which debaters mostly do not perceive as excluding participants from mainstream society; class-based, which excludes the poor,

¹⁰ This development, radicalised after the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, is possible to demonstrate by examining the findings of Jiří Šafr from research in 2008, which significantly differs from my findings more than 10 years later: “Nevertheless, there is no evidence in the quantitative data presented here of any hostility towards either the upper class or the opposite stratification extreme, represented here by benefits recipients as the underclass” (2008: 77).

and exceptionally, also ostentatiously wealthy participants; and characteristics perceived as completely alien to the local culture, based on different ethnicity, religion, or abstinence.

In the case of Czech RTV, instead of the distinction between the middle and working classes, it is reasonable to consider the distinction between a majority able to comply with the normative ideal against a deprived or precariat class – people with low levels of economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Czech RTV plays a role in operationalising the hegemonic habitus of the majority, showing the audience how to make normal Czech “selves” by developing just the right forms of cultural, symbolic and economic capital. This cultural “us” is therefore defined in opposition to an imagined project of deprived groups living on the margins of society, which are seen as being of lesser value and pathological. They are furthermore seen by discussants as a “problem” and an object of state intervention; welfare officers are repeatedly called for in debates to intervene in families seen as problematic: “The social workers probably have blinded eyes when they don’t see it and this state is really in decay” (nova.cz).

At the same time, online debating viewers agree with RTV programmes’ depictions that deprived people are to blame for their own situations with housing and family problems, rather than the society as a whole. The people from the deprived classes are seen as unable to change their habits, and incapable of self-improvement. Any life change offered by the RTV programmes remains unrealised, because of the nature of the participants: “You really think that such a woman can change for the better. You are really naive. Just look at her. She would have to be born a little better again, simply in another life, with a different face” (nova.cz).

The solution, in a view shared by a large part of society, is clear. There is no reason to help them, as they are not able to utilise the help; it is enough to give them some small social benefits so they do not starve, and they must be strictly controlled. Thus, it makes no sense to launch social housing programmes and other kinds of support. The most often used words are parasite and parasitising: “These two women are parasites on our society. They will not work, but will parasitise” (iprima.cz). And the everyday stream of RTV programmes backs this view, as the shows are understood by online discussants to depict people who are not part of us, but the “parasitic” other: “Such useless people should not live at all They are just a burden on society” (nova.cz).

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