

# The kingdom of antique televisions: Reparability and the afterlives of socialist electronics

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## Abstract

A small but committed community of Czech hobbyists maintains a large collection of socialist-era domestic appliances, including televisions, radios, refrigerators, and washing machines, repairing them and displaying them in informal exhibits. This article explores the history of these objects, how they came to be in the hands of collectors, and the role they played in mediating the late socialist Czechoslovak gender culture. It argues that socialist appliances are uniquely well suited to repair and renovation because they were produced in an environment without a culture of planned obsolescence, a profit motive, or a high expectation of innovation. Furthermore, because socialist appliances need regular repair and maintenance, which was often done by men, many men had intimate practical knowledge of even the most feminized machines (for example, vacuums and washing machines).

**Keywords:** Czechoslovakia, consumer socialism, history of domestic appliances, masculinity, post-Socialism.

## Résumé

Une communauté d'amateurs tchèques, petite mais engagée, entretient une vaste collection d'appareils électroménagers de l'ère socialiste, notamment des téléviseurs, des radios, des réfrigérateurs et des machines à laver, les répare et les expose dans des expositions informelles. Cet article explore l'histoire de ces objets, la manière dont ils se sont retrouvés dans les mains de collectionneurs et le rôle qu'ils ont joué dans la médiation du régime socialiste tchécoslovaque en matière de genre. L'article démontre que les appareils électroménagers socialistes sont particulièrement bien adaptés à la réparation et à la rénovation parce qu'ils ont été produits dans un environnement dépourvu d'obsolescence programmée, d'une motivation de profit ou d'une forte attente d'innovation. En outre, comme les appareils ménagers nécessitent des réparations et un entretien régulier – souvent effectué par des hommes –, nombre d'entre eux avaient une connaissance pratique intime des machines même des plus féminisées (par exemple, les aspirateurs et les machines à laver).

**Mots-clés :** Tchécoslovaquie, socialisme de consommation, histoire des appareils ménagers, masculinité, post-socialisme.

## Introduction

Deep in the heart of the Czech Television national broadcasting complex on the outskirts of Prague is a windowless room full of old appliances. Record players, tape recorders, and televisions line shelves along the walls and lay stacked in precarious piles on dusty tables throughout the room (Figure 1). Each is marked to indicate whether works or not. The televisions come from all over the world, including the United States, France, and West Germany, but mostly they are from the former Eastern Bloc and primarily Czechoslovakia. The room functions as something like a hobby shed for a handful of men—and they are all men—who work as technicians at Czech Television. They call it their kingdom. Formally, most of the collection belongs to the station, but these technicians spend their evenings and weekends pouring hundreds of hours into bringing these socialist-era gadgets back to life.



Figure 1. Basement room of Ceska Televize featuring the station's collection of antique televisions - © Julia Mead 2022

The technicians I met at Czech Television in Prague are members of a club that calls itself “Teletým” (a portmanteau of television and team, in Czech *televizor* and *tým*). The members of the Teletým collective have a wide age range, and many are young enough to have only limited memories of life under socialism. One member with whom I corresponded, Václav Jacyszyn, told me he began collecting old appliances as a teenager during the transition from socialism to capitalism, when everyone was trying to replace their old machines with newly available Western brands.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Email from Václav Jacyszyn, 21 April 2022.

During that period, he said, it was easy for him to rescue old –but functional– appliances from friends and neighbours, or even to pick them up off the street. The Teletým collective officially formed in 2008 and is composed of five members, all men, who live across the Czech Republic (Teletým 2019). Some specialise in collecting and refurbishing TVs, some in cars, and some in household appliances. Other such groups exist throughout the country, and many people engage in similar hobbies without membership in an organised group. In this article, I refer to the members of Teletým and others who engage in similar activities generally as “hobbyists.” This term emphasizes the non-professional nature of their tinkering activities. Although some members of Teletým are employed by Czech Television, their work restoring socialist-era appliances is distinctly outside the purview of their professional responsibilities. The category of “hobbyist”, as I am using it here, is gendered. Though women are not excluded in any formal sense from these groups, the hobbyists I met were all men and their club was clearly a homosocial space.

The men with whom I spoke all had stories of facing bewilderment from their acquaintances and family members, many of whom associated tinkering and repair with the socialist past. Indeed, why would anyone spend so much time and energy lovingly restoring the supposedly archaic goods of state socialism? Why would they build an entire community around exhibiting the fruits of their labour and educating their friends and neighbours about the gadgets that, not so long ago, were roundly considered obsolete?

I argue that there are two explanations for the phenomenon of Czech hobbyists in the 21st century coming together to restore and celebrate electronics manufactured in socialist Czechoslovakia, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. The first reason is rooted in the specific materiality of these electronic devices. Their durability makes them enjoyable to work with and their lack of highly specialised parts makes them approachable to amateur tinkerers. As Jan Podhajský, the informal leader of the Teletým group, explained to me:

Under socialism a television lasted fifteen years on average and it was always worth it to repair it. Today a television usually only lasts the length of the warranty period, and the cost to repair it is more than the cost to replace it, or it is completely impossible [to fix].<sup>2</sup>

When pressed to compare the quality of socialist appliances with their contemporary counterparts available in the Czech Republic, my interlocutor conceded that it was “not simple”, and that although they tend to be more efficient, “today’s electronics

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<sup>2</sup> Email from Jan Podhajský, 10 May 2022. Translation is my own. All translations from Czech are mine unless otherwise stated.

become obsolete much more quickly.<sup>3</sup>” In other words, socialist appliances live on in the workshops of devoted hobbyists because their designs make many of them particularly well suited to modification and repair. Socialist domestic appliances offer an opportunity to study gender and material culture in tandem. Analysing machines not merely in their ideal or intended function (when they work as advertised), but also when they deviate from their intended function (when they break), illuminates the specific gendered division of labour in the socialist household.

The second reason is rooted in the way that technical expertise and do-it-yourself culture function to construct a particular form of masculinity rooted in rationality, analytical thinking, and practical skill. The notion that technical expertise is the particular domain of men exists in many historical and cultural contexts, but it had a distinct character during the socialist period in Czechoslovakia arising from commodity shortages and the particular gender culture of late socialism.<sup>4</sup> The contemporary hobbyists I met are not only working with objects from the late socialist period, in many ways, their activities are a continuation of the do-it-yourself culture that many Czechs (as well as residents of other countries in the former Eastern Bloc) associate strongly with the socialist past. This common association is present, for example, in the discourse around museums that showcase everyday life and objects from the socialist period. One such museum, Retromuseum in Cheb, opened in 2016. A television news report about its opening asked, “What was lifelike for Czechoslovaks from the 1960s to the 1980s, and what objects surrounded them? The Gallery of Fine Arts in Cheb has opened Retromuseum, where visitors can recall the design and domestic creativity [domáci tvořivost] of those years” (ČT24 2016). This indicates that in the Czech national memory, domestic creativity is a particular hallmark of the late socialist period.

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<sup>3</sup> Email from Jan Podhajský, 10 May 2022. It is worth noting, however, that in terms of electrical efficiency, Czechoslovak socialist refrigerators were more comparable to, if not more efficient than, their western contemporary counterparts. A full-size 1977 Calex 210 deluxe used an average of 1.1 kilowatt hours per day of electricity, compared with 1.61 kilowatt hours per day of the average US refrigerator in 1977 (Davies 1980).

<sup>4</sup> For example, on the rise of DIY culture in the United States as a constituent feature of post-World War II suburban “Dad” masculinity, see Gelber 1997; on a similar but later movement in the Federal Republic of Germany, see Jonathan Voges 2017; for an ethnographic account of how working class men in Malaysia and white-collar engineers in Sweden instantiate their masculinity through their relationships with machines, see Ulf Mellström 2004. In the Soviet Union, where DIY culture was most similar to socialist Czechoslovakia, Alexey Golubev and Olga Smolyak (2013) argue that making machines at home was a key feature of the “Soviet man” and his approach to adventure and dominance over both women and nature. Finally, feminist scholar of science and technology, Wendy Faulkner (2000), points out that the pervasive association of masculinity and technical expertise does real harm to women pursuing technical and engineering careers. It is my hope that by historicising this association and untangling its particular valences in Czech/Czechoslovak society, I can help to denaturalise the idea that men are somehow “naturally” better suited to technical work and thinking.

To be clear, this article does not argue that Do-It-Yourself practices are unique to the late socialist period in Czechoslovakia. Nor does it seek to establish a reductive and ahistorical contrast between socialist appliances (durable) and capitalist appliances (flimsy). Such a binary approach would only serve to reify Cold War oppositional thinking, which careful scholarship has worked hard to reshape. As Sari Autoio-Sarasmo and Katalin Miklóssy (2013) write in the introduction to *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, “Cold War bloc politics and the East-West ideological dividing line did not in fact penetrate the whole of society, on either the Western or the Eastern side of Europe” (Autoio-Sarasmo and Miklóssy 2013, 2). Indeed, Podhajský’s assessment of the declining durability of Czech/Czechoslovak televisions is likely to resonate with people who have never lived under socialism: *they don’t make them like they used to*. Even in the United States, the current brief lifespan of televisions is a recent development. The average lifespan of a television in the US has been steadily decreasing over the past half century from an average of fourteen years between 1970 and 1990 to eight years between 1990 and 2020 (Abbasi et al. 2015, S5). Although equivalent lifespan data is not available before 1970, in 1949 televisions cost between \$99.50 and \$695.50, meaning that even the cheapest sets were nearly one third of the average family income.<sup>5</sup> Western European sets were an even larger investment for a household in the early post-war years, and in countries with national television broadcasters the expense of owning a TV included an annual licensing fee (Smith 1995). In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, durable domestic appliances generally became available slightly later than in the West but represented a similarly large investment (Patterson 2012, 123). Although unfolding along slightly different timelines, consumption of large domestic appliances in the post-war world looked somewhat similar across the East/West divide, despite the persistent shortages and more complex procurement methods required in the East.

Similarly, although post-socialist discourse situates “domestic creativity” in the socialist past, DIY practices did not follow Cold War boundaries and pre-date the Cold War altogether. In his study of DIY and masculinity in the United States, Steven Gelber (1997) locates the origins of “Mr. Fixit” in the early 20th century, when men began to seek refuge from the industrial or white-collar workplace in home workshops, where they “recapture the pride that went along with doing a task from start to finish with one’s own hands”, harkening back to the pre-industrial home-based artisanal economy (1997, 68). After World War II, masculine DIY culture exploded in the US,

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<sup>5</sup> Television prices from Tom Genova, “Television history: Postwar American television”, at [earlytelevision.org](http://earlytelevision.org). The United States Census reported the average family income in 1949 to be \$3,100 in “Income of Families and Persons in the United State: 1949”. 18 February 1951, Report Number P60-07.

a development Gelber attributes to the growth of suburbs and men's desire to carve out a section of the family house for themselves: "There is no doubt that single home ownership was the sine qua non for do-it-yourself activity" (1997, 68). The history of DIY in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, however, shows that this is not at all the case universally, although the constraints of apartment dwelling mean that many men had to content themselves with smaller, less private space for DIY hobbies: "shelves packed with radio components, overhead cupboards cram-full with spare parts for bicycles and cars, or tables with innumerable drawers" (Golubev and Smolyak 2013, 535). Despite this difference, Gelber's concept of "domestic masculinity", defined as "a male sphere *inside* the house", is equally applicable to the late socialist context (1997, 73). Critically, this "male sphere" is both physical (cupboards full of spare parts) and intellectual (the expectation that men are knowledgeable of and responsible for maintaining household technology.)

Keeping in mind these similarities, this article will delineate the specific characteristics of socialist domestic technical masculinity, using Czechoslovakia as an emblematic case-study because of its relatively high level of industry and consumption. I define socialist domestic technical masculinity as a prized form of manliness in which advanced technical skill helped a man earn respect from potential romantic partners and his peers. It also indicated savvy and know-how in navigating the challenging consumer landscape. In many socialist countries, spare parts were difficult to come by and one could not simply go to the hardware store to buy the necessary materials for a DIY project (Golubev and Smolyak 2013, 528). Instead, it was common to steal supplies from the workplace or cleverly re-purpose a component of a different disused appliance (Bren 2012, 45). The post-socialist hobbyists I met exist in the shadow of socialist domestic technical masculinity, but some of them feel that today their skills are undervalued and seen as eccentric. For these post-socialist hobbyists, their technical skill is more impressive to the other men in their niche community than women who see their dating profiles.

## 1. Domestic masculinity and gender complementarity, 1969-1989

The 1970s Czechoslovak television series *The woman behind the counter* [Žena za pultem]<sup>6</sup> illustrates how late socialist popular culture portrayed mechanical knowledge as a masculine domain. The series follows a recently divorced woman, Anna Holubová, as she balances her job at a market with raising her two children. In the seventh episode, Anna invites the man who will become her second husband

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<sup>6</sup> Information on this television series is available on the IMDb website, at this [direct link](#).

to her apartment. As she shows him her son's room, he picks up a model train and asks her if it is from Japan. "I don't know", she responds, "I don't understand that kind of thing at all" (Deitl 1977). As the episode continues, he picks up a broken toy truck that also belongs to her son and offers to fix it, something Anna had not been able to do herself, much to her son's frustration. Anna's inability to repair toys is an example of how her life is shown to be not *quite* complete without a man. The series depicts her successfully earning a living and emotionally supporting her children, but this otherwise competent heroine cannot bring her son's toy truck back to life, highlighting the void of masculinity in his life.

This scene from *The woman behind the counter* [Žena za pultem] is not evidence that all Czechoslovak women in 1977 were incapable of repairing small machines. It is, after all, fiction. Rather, the television show can be read as a fantasy of late socialist life: the shelves at the store where Anna worked were always abundantly stocked, bearing little resemblance to the actual shortages such a shop would have navigated (Bren 2010, 191). Similarly, Anna's conversation with her suitor can be read as a fantasy on two levels. Firstly, it could be the fantasy of a divorced, hard-working everywoman, who longs for a competent man to enter her life and pick up some of her burden. It is significant that he offers to fix something trivial, a toy, rather than something essential, like the water heater. Anna's general competence is essential to the show, and if her apartment were truly in a state of disrepair, surely, she would have hired a handyman to fix it. The fantasy of a new man in her life, then, is like the toy. It would bring happiness and leisure, but it is not an absolute necessity. A second reading is that this scene depicts not the fantasy of women who watched the serial and identified with Anna, but rather the fantasy of the late socialist everyman channelled by the show's creator, Jaroslav Dietl. In the man's fantasy, the child's broken toy represents a sphere of family life where he is still necessary, despite what Libora Oates-Indruchová has identified as a "weakening and narrowing of masculine identity" (2006, 430). His financial contribution was not essential (Anna was making ends meet on her own), nor was his decision-making authority (again, Anna managed as the head of her household), but the broken toy represents the one way in which Anna's family was incomplete without a husband.

To understand why television writers represented electronic toy repair as the final frontier of masculine indispensability in 1977, it is necessary to contextualise the gender discourse of late socialism in the longer history of Czechoslovak gender politics. The first Czechoslovak constitution, ratified in 1920, enshrined equality between men and women in law, and inter-war Czech feminists leveraged considerable political muscle attempting to make gender equality a reality. They faced resistance,

however, when they argued that legal equality ought to extend into the home and was not just a matter for the public sphere (Feinberg 2006, 5). As historian Melissa Feinberg (2006) has argued, “Gender difference within the family was perceived by many Czechs as the crucial glue that held Czech society together” (2006, 225). Despite the profound ruptures in Czechoslovak government and society between 1938 and 1948, historians have shown that there was considerable continuity between the inter-war women’s movement and post-war gender policy, even if the influence of earlier feminist activists went uncited by Communist leaders (Feinberg 2006; Nečasová 2011; B. Havelková 2017). Similarly, post-war Czechoslovakia continued to struggle with the tension between a legal commitment to equality of the sexes and the issues it posed for women’s traditional role in the family.

Nearly one quarter of Czechoslovak women worked full-time outside the home in 1921, and many more took on part-time or seasonal work (Feinberg 2006, 100). These women were primarily members of the working class and were often employed as cooks, cleaners, or nannies for wealthy families, while some other women may have worked in factories. By 1955, the Czechoslovak workforce was made up of 42.3% women, thanks largely to a massive labour recruitment campaign (Nečasová 2021, 146). Despite this marked increase, the transformation is better understood in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. Women who had previously worked in domestic service entered formal employment in the public sphere, which likely came with a higher level of social esteem as well as pensions, vacations, and other extra-monetary benefits. Furthermore, in the early socialist period, women were encouraged to enter traditionally masculine professions such as coal mining and develop technical skills (Fidelis 2010; Nečasová 2011). This complex reorganisation of women’s employment had equally complex consequences for social reproduction. Some, though certainly not all, of the social reproductive labour working class women had previously done for their own families and the families of their employers was transferred to the state in the form of public day-cares and nurseries, cafeterias, and public laundries (H. Havelková and Oates-Indruchová 2015; True 2003; Wagnerová 2017). Over time, the radical vision of women’s emancipation attempted during the Stalinist period faded. Scholars have shown how, by the 1970s in Czechoslovakia, official legal discourse again endorsed traditional notions of women’s “natural” domestic qualities and men’s “natural” inclination toward public life (H. Havelková and Oates-Indruchová 2015; B. Havelková 2017). Practice, of course, does not always align with discourse. In many ways, in the late socialist period, men were intimately involved in the functioning of the domestic sphere, although their role was not always



clear.<sup>7</sup> Technical knowledge was a meaningful way for men to participate in the domestic sphere without compromising their masculinity by doing “women’s work.”

It is in this context –legal equality between men and women, robust participation by women in the formal workforce, and a strong discursive construction of men’s and women’s “natural” differences– that the ideal of the technically skilled, romantically desirable handyman flourished. To investigate the link between handiness and romance during socialism, scholars at the Czech Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology analysed mentions of the word handyman or “do-it-yourselfer” [*kutil*] in the personals section [*seznámení*] of Communist Party daily newspaper, *Red Justice* [*Rudé Právo*]. They found 549 mentions total, and of those 184 were in dating personal advertisements (Gibas et al. 2019, 23). The researchers’ close reading of a selection of dating ads from the 1970s and 1980s showed that being handy was often bragged about by men and listed as a desirable trait for a partner by women. They found advertisements referencing DIY from a wide range of ages and professions, indicating that handiness was seen as an attractive quality in men regardless of generation or class background.

To be sure, socialist technical masculinity developed in homosocial spaces as well as heterosexual ones. Particularly handy men earned esteem not only from potential romantic partners but also from colleagues and supervisors, and groups of men gathered in outside of the home, away from their families, to collaborate and show off their work (Golubev and Smolyak 2013, 520). For example, in the annual *Teletým* newsletter, one reader published a letter bragging about the respect he earned as a handyman nearly 70 years earlier. The club’s activities prompted him to “reminisce about by first beginnings as a ‘repairman’ [‘opravář’].” He began fixing televisions as a young man during World War II. He recounted how military superiors had such confidence in him that they would give him the keys to their homes so he could make the repairs while they were out. His status as an amateur repairman earned the respect of his superiors, a feeling he clearly appreciated. After the war, he continued to repair televisions and refrigerators for friends and colleagues, a role that earned him the esteem and gratitude of his community. He lovingly describes a series of repairs he made to his first refrigerator which, after several decades, eventually became “so unhappily broken that it could not be used.” Nevertheless, maintaining it was “an experience” through which he developed a strong affective relationship with an important domestic appliance (Teletýmák 2019).

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Betts argues that the late socialist period in the GDR was characterised by an increased importance of the private sphere for men and women alike, a development that had resonance Czechoslovakia (see Betts 2010 and Oates-Indruchová 2006).

This man's relationship with his refrigerator was a happy one, but not all men and machines live in such harmony. In an analysis of cultural representations of men and refrigerators in 1950s American life, Paul Gansky (2011) argues that the introduction of the machine into the household posed a threat to traditional masculine authority and competence. The kitchen, he writes, "consistently serves as a stage for male incompetence, refracting and intensifying the challenges the appliance poses to male intelligence, class, and strength" (2011, 73). A family man who was unable or unwilling to repair the refrigerator when it broke felt like a "child" (Gansky 2011, 77). In socialist Czechoslovakia too, household appliances could refract anxieties about masculine responsibility. A 1962 home maintenance handbook for children includes a warning to its young readers about what can go wrong if the man of the house failed to repair plumbing, furniture, and appliances: "The mother is the foundation of the home, but the father and the children must help her" (Eltner 1962, 57). If the father does not help the mother, a household could end up in a state of disarray like one the author recently visited, in which "you walked into the toilet, pulled the chain, and the water splashed up to your neck" and "a collapsed letterbox by the hallway door...was hanging on by its last screw" (Eltner 1962, 58). Ironically, the father of this household was a professional plumber and had the skills to repair the toilet. The author of the handbook recounted his visit to the family's "museum of horror" not to condemn the man's lack of skill but his lack of initiative (Eltner 1962, 58).

Records from a state-run marriage counselling centre in the city of Ostrava reveal that some men chafed under their wives' expectation that they be responsible for repair. One man came to the marriage counselling centre in October 1989 on the cusp of divorce from his wife, eager to describe his marital unhappiness to the staff psychologist. The counsellor's notes read:

The client is a coal miner, he is always working...he doesn't even have time to finish a book, which bothers him. He repairs everything at home, [including] the car. The wife still feels wronged... The wife is at home (maternity leave), [but] she imagines he too should do work around the house.<sup>8</sup>

For this unhappy husband, his wife's expectation that he be responsible for household and automobile repairs was not a source of pride but an annoyance. To be sure, household repair was far from this couple's only trouble (subsequent notes reveal the husband regularly physically assaulted his wife). Nevertheless, his complaint demonstrates the ubiquity of the expectation that men *must* make be technically

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<sup>8</sup> Záznamový arch, Manželské a předmanželské poradny, 11 October 1989, collection 673, box 30, folder 60, page 31, Městský ústav sociálních služeb Ostrava [Ostrava municipal office of social services], Archiv Města Ostrava [Municipal archive of Ostrava] Ostrava, Czech Republic. These marriage counselling records were anonymised for my use.

competent to be good partners, and that failure to do so could pose a significant obstacle to a relationship. The expectation that technical knowledge and household repair was the domain of men was affirmed by published marriage advice. In his handbook for navigating divorce *Po rozvodu*, the psychologist Ivo Plaňava (1986) emphasizes how necessary a man is to household maintenance. In a chapter of his book, on “The divorced woman and a household without a man”, he encourages women who have recently divorced to “reorganise the flat to make it as suitable as possible for those who will continue to live in it”, taking advantage of the space opened up by the man’s departure (Plaňava 1986, 56). He is clear that he does not mean undertaking any changes more strenuous than rearranging furniture and advises against “filling the vacancy quickly with a new man” (Plaňava 1986, 56). Beyond reorganising the flat, he recommends that a divorced woman take stock of her lifestyle and consider how much she can realistically manage alone. Perhaps she can take care the flat on her own, but if she has much more than that, she is apt to make unwise decisions:

There are men, generous gentlemen, who walk away from a large furnished apartment and leave everything to the wife—including the holiday cottage [*chata*] and the car. I’ve heard it with my own ears from women... But beware, ladies, lest the generous gift become a Trojan Horse [*danajský dar*], which backfires on the recipient and overwhelms the woman with such worries and responsibilities that these things cease to serve her and become a burden under the weight of which she begins to bend, hunch, [and] collapse. Or else she may be desperate and begin a risky search for a new handyman [*údržbář*]. (Plaňava 1986, 58).

This advice emphasises the author’s assumption of women’s technical ineptitude on a number of fronts. Firstly, there is Plaňava’s basic concern that taking care of a car, or a holiday cottage would “overwhelm” a single woman, despite how useful or pleasurable these things may initially seem. The psychologist worries that a woman saddled with such burdens may rush into a new relationship just to have a man around to fix things, revealing a mistrust of this imagined woman’s judgment. Embedded in this advice is another, more subtle, insight about what the responsibility for repair might mean to a man. Although many men surely took pride in their technical repair skills, for others, such as the coal miner in marriage counselling, the expectation that they be responsible for maintaining the home and car felt like a burden. On the other side of a divorce like Plaňava describes is the “generous gentleman” who walks away from his worldly possessions into a new bachelor’s life of freedom. Whether or not this man saddles his ex-wife with crushing maintenance responsibilities maliciously or unintentionally is beside the point: he is happy to relinquish them.

## 2. Cheap electricity and expensive electronics, 1969-1989

The DIY culture of 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia had a particular affinity for electronic gadgets, made possible by the government's January 1969 introduction of cheaper electricity rates across the country. Refrigerators, televisions, vacuum cleaners, and their ilk require a steady supply of electricity.<sup>9</sup> An advertisement for electric heaters in the women's magazine *Vlasta* trumpeted the new policy:

Energy restrictions were in force until practically the beginning of last year, including a ban on certain electrical appliances. The capacity shortage in power plants, which only produced enough to supply heavy industry, caused the electricity consumption in Czechoslovak households to lag far behind the world average. In some areas of the republic, it did not even reach the level of some developing countries. Today, however, the energy situation in Czechoslovakia has changed dramatically. All restrictive tariff measures have been abolished and new rates have been introduced, allowing everyone to freely choose a favourable rate (Kouba 1969, 26).

It was not incidental that this policy, and the accompanying advertisement for electric heaters, appeared in a women's magazine. The ease of electric heaters likely would have appealed to women who were accustomed to heating their homes with a coal or wood stove and responsible for tending to the fire and shovelling ash. One drawback of the electric heaters, however, was their "rather high purchase price", which made it likely that a partnered woman would consult with her husband before buying one (Kouba 1969, 26).

The new electricity policy relied on an intensification of coal mining and opened the door for electric appliances to become a part of daily life in a new way, but it did not guarantee that every Czechoslovak citizen could buy a washing machine or a TV whenever they wished. Even though durable consumer goods were more available in the 1970s than the 1950s, people still often had to pull strings and wait years to acquire them. They were also expensive. A standard size Calex 210 refrigerator cost 4,170 Czechoslovak crowns in 1977.<sup>10</sup> For context, the average monthly salary of an industrial worker was around 2,400 crowns, meaning that buying a refrigerator would require nearly two months' wages (ČSÚ 1981). A refrigerator, the hallmark commodity of consumer socialism, was a major investment even in the most accessible of contexts (Patterson 2013, 127). Given their cost and the complexity of procuring one, it made much more sense to repair them than to replace them.

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<sup>9</sup> The electricity price cut was followed shortly by a price freeze for basic foods and fuels, laying the foundation for so-called "consumer socialism" in Czechoslovakia during the period of Normalisation (see Paulina Bren 2010, 85-89).

<sup>10</sup> [Calex 210 Deluxe owners' manual, warranty sectio, 23 June 1977](#), held in the private collection of Václav Jacyszyn, accessible via the *Teletym* website.

The quality of socialist-era Czechoslovak appliances ranged widely from Elektro-Praga Hlinsko vacuum cleaners and food processors, which were known to be of good quality and were even exported to Western Europe, to the Tatramat washing machines, which, although they could be made to work, had a design flaw that caused them to jump around the bathroom when in operation, potentially garnering the resentment of downstairs neighbours.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it was generally expected that all of these appliances would need regular maintenance. Although a formal network of professional repairman existed throughout the country and user manuals included addresses of repair shops (as was common everywhere before the internet), professional repairmen were too few and too far between to fix every small problem. For example, a booklet of repair shops that came with a Tatramat washing machine in the mid-1970s lists 198 professional repair shops across the Czechoslovakia.<sup>12</sup> This sounds like quite a high number, but it is more modest when put in context of the total ubiquity of these washing machines. Tatramat's automatic washing machines entered stores in 1968, replacing earlier semi-automatic washing machines, and the number of washing machines in Czechoslovak households skyrocketed. By 1977 there were 97 washing machines for every 100 Czechoslovak households (R.F.K. 2013). This means that there were somewhere in the realm of 2.4 million Tatramats across the country, or about 12,000 per professional repairman.<sup>13</sup> Professional repairmen, responsible for seeing to a number of different appliances, would not have had the capacity to attend to every problem. The imbalance between repairmen and number of washing machines indicates that the responsibility for maintaining washing machines, like the responsibility for washing clothes and linens, trickled downward to individual owners, meaning individual men became more involved in the process of household maintenance. One reader of the Slovak online magazine *Retrománia* submitted a 500-word long comment under a story about the history of Tatramat washing machines detailing all the repairs he had done to his Tatramat over the previous fifty years, including replacing the enamel washing tub, the engine, and the belt. Thanks to those years of diligent repair, the machine lasted for nearly half a century (R.F.K. 2013).

Throughout the 20th century, manufactures have marketed domestic appliances to women under the premise of making their household chores easier. As Ruth Schwartz Cowan has argued, these types of appliances have even transformed some tasks that were done by men or children in the pre-industrial era, such as cleaning rugs,

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<sup>11</sup> Email from Jan Podhajský 10 May 2022.

<sup>12</sup> [List of Tatramat repairmen \[Seznamy opraven Tatramat\]](#), held in the private collection of Václav Jacyszyn, accessible via the *Teletym* website.

<sup>13</sup> Calculated from Český statistický úřad data set “Počet obyvatel v letech 1785-2022” [Czech Statistical Office data set ‘Population 1785-2022’].

into feminised labour, ultimately adding to women's overall domestic workload even as they claim to lighten it (Cowan 1983). A close analysis of late socialist appliance marketing in Czechoslovakia shows, however, that the growing presence of household electronics created new chores for men, too. Although most advertising campaigns for household appliances were directed toward women, some targeted men, suggesting they could help manage their wives' domestic burden by buying them gadgets. One campaign from the Elektro-Praga Hlinsko enterprise (which was privatised after 1989 and renamed ETA) explicitly mocked the idea that men could or would help women with arduous analogue chores. Men are shown doing tasks such as grinding coffee by hand, chopping wood, and sweeping next to text that reads "Men can help women...but not like that!"<sup>14</sup> Rather, these ads suggested, men could help their wives by purchasing a food processor, a hot plate, or a vacuum cleaner for the household. An advertisement for electric heating elements appealed to modern socialist men's rationality and reinforced his identity as a "technician":

Modern man, the technician [*technik*], knows how long it takes to prepare the kindling, to light it, to heat the stove, then the pot, and only after all that to heat its contents. Therefore, he should get his wife a quick-cooking hot plate or an immersion heater. Both will save her much time and effort.<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, this advertisement affirms the idea that domestic labour is women's labour. Indeed, a promotional company publication from 1973 claims that the purpose of Elektro-Praga products is "mainly to make housewives' work easier as they forge the path to modern food production" and boasted that their appliances had become "an almost indispensable household aid" (Beneš eds). On the other hand, one might ask: why were these particular advertisements addressed to men at all? Socialist women, with their independent incomes, could theoretically buy home appliances if they chose, even if they had to spend many months or even years saving the necessary money. Because domestic appliances were expensive so expensive, however, their purchase would be a serious undertaking and require knowledge of the appliance's technical specifications, which advertisers assumed men were better equipped to do.

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<sup>14</sup> "Muži pomáhají ženám ale ne tak!" [Men can help women... but not like that!], viewed at the exhibit "Technika v domácnosti" [Technology in the home] at the National Technical Museum, Prague, January 27, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 2. ETA Vacuum Cleaner, 1962

© Collection Vysavače ETA

A more typical advertisement for an Elektro-Praga vacuum cleaner comes from the 1962 manual for the ETA 406 vacuum cleaner (Figure 2). In it a woman is smiling, carrying the vacuum, and demonstrating its use. Further illustrations show the woman assembling and disassembling the vacuum, emptying the dust filter, and packing it up for storage. The essential message is the same as the advertisements featuring men: domestic work (particularly non-relational domestic work like cleaning and cooking) is women's work, although it is appropriate for men to provision tools that could make this work less arduous. The fact that a woman is shown disassembling the vacuum to empty the filter emphasizes the quality of the design: *so simple a woman can clean it!* This type of gendered advertising is, in some ways, at odds with the implementation of

technical education for boys and girls during the socialist period. The 1962 household repair handbook discussed in the previous section was nominally addressed to boys and girls, although the illustrations in the book exclusively depict boys. The boys are doing tasks such as woodworking (Elstner 1962, 78); carrying saws, ladders, anvils, and screw drivers (8-9); shovelling and using a wheelbarrow (142); painting a wall (144); repairing a bicycle (167); installing a door (174); and installing various electronics, including a light-bulb, an iron, a kettle (211). Despite the book's subtitle, "A handbook for boys and girls who like tidiness and a nice home", girls are nowhere to be found.

Because he is addressing children, Elstner puts particular emphasis on safety, particularly around electricity: "Electricity is useful but dangerous...It does not belong in the hands of the inexperienced" (1962, 212). To illustrate this point, he tells the story of a friend's daughter in České Budějovice who was electrocuted and died when her boyfriend tried to play a prank on her by running electricity through her door handle. He did not expect the ground to be wet, and the electricity went right through

her (Elstner 1962, 63-64). Whether or not this anecdote is true or a cautionary fiction, it does highlight how dangerous a little bit of technical knowledge combined with the assumed recklessness of youth can be a dangerous combination. Although the boyfriend made a fatal mistake, he had enough understanding of electricity to electrocute the doorknob. As his young readers practiced their wiring and sawing, Elstner recommends they consult “experienced people, handymen, repairmen, and DIYers” who are always “looking for better working methods, clever improvements, handy gadgets, and jigs. They will be happy to show them off and help you” (Elstner 1962, 7). He emphasizes the pride these home repairmen felt in their work and confirms that “there are true masters among them” (Elstner 1962, 7).

Women were more likely to be represented in DIY books focusing on textiles and home décor, for example Dušan Pavlů’s 1972 *Artistic DIY* [Umělecké kutilství]. This book cites therapeutic reasons for why someone might make a “mosaic table, a batik-dyed cloth, or a lychee lamp”, in order to “escape” and “take refuge” (Pavlů 1972, back cover). Rather than praising the skill of people who make such things, the author reassures readers that it is acceptable to make “objects that are often ridiculous in their imperfection” because the more important function of DIY is to capture the satisfaction of making something with one’s own hands (Pavlů 1972, back cover). Despite the discursive relegation of women to imperfect handicrafts, some women developed advanced knowledge of construction and repair methods involving carpentry, electricity, and other supposedly masculine fields. In fact, three popular manuals on home repair were written by a woman and included detailed instructions on repairing a roof, installing electric wiring, and fixing a gas stove (Volicerová 1972, 1981a, 1981b). In reality, there was surely a wide breadth of skill and desire to do technical repairs among women, just as there was among men, although the association between men and technical repair persists.

### 3. Post-socialism and the changing status of Do-It-Yourself

In the early 1990s, during Czechoslovakia’s (and later the Czech Republic’s) transition to capitalism, DIY occupied a tenuous place in everyday life. Such an embedded practice could not disappear overnight, even if the consumer landscape did. It experienced a slight dip in the early 1990s –as indicated by the declining popularity of the annual “Golden Nail” competition run by the DIY magazine *Udělej si sam*– but the mid-1990s, DIY regained much of its popularity. Sociologists Petr Gibas, Karel Šima, and Hana Daňková (2019) argue that “in the post-socialist space, DIY represents one of the strategies to compensate for economic deprivation” and particularly offers men an opportunity to establish their masculinity by providing materially for their families



even if they are unemployed or otherwise financially precarious (2019, 17). Despite its durability, do-it-yourself underwent a qualitative change in the post-socialist period.

In the 1970s and 1980s, even official DIY manuals encouraged readers to scavenge for supplies and completely transform objects they already had. A 1971 issue of *Udělej si sam* launched a call for readers to search their workplaces for DIY supplies:

In factories and warehouses of commercial organisations, there are often materials or parts lying around that are no longer useful for their original purpose; perhaps they could, suitably adapted, serve a different purpose for DIY. If you know of such material or parts, please write to us (*USS* 1971, 35).

In the 1990s and 2000s, by contrast, DIY emphasized modifying cheap goods purchased from stores to make them more functional, for example using an *IKEA* shelf as the foundation for a desk (Gibas et al. 2019, 54).

By the 2010s, the socialist culture of repair and reuse seemed distinct enough to warrant preservation in museums. As mentioned previously, the Retromuseum in Cheb opened in 2016 and emphasized both socialist-era professional designs, such as ETA appliances, as well as home-made objects donated to the museum's collection (Retromuseum Cheb 2022). Another museum dedicated exclusively to DIY opened in Polná in 2013 and contains such creative constructions as a lawn mower made from a washing machine engine and spare sheet metal and a washing machine made from a bedside table and a tractor engine (Stýblová 2013, *Muzeum kutilství Polná* catalogue). The Polná museum explicitly locates the late socialist period as the heyday of Czech do-it-yourself, when the idiom “golden Czech hands” [zlaté české ručičky] came into popularity to refer to “the traditional Czech ability to produce, invent, or repair something in an unusual, improvised, yet effective way<sup>16</sup>.” Ingenuity is not, of course, a unique national quality, but the general dearth of foreign technology in late socialist Czechoslovakia did lead to specifically Czech creations.

My host at Czech Television pointed out that some of the quirks of socialist electronics were due to the fact that they tended to be assembled completely from domestic components, leading to the same parts being used in many products. For example, the same type of switch was used in a vacuum cleaner, a wall light switch, and a bathroom cabinet<sup>17</sup>. Although this could occasionally lead to clunky designs, it also meant that components were accessible and that an appliance that was completely broken could easily be stripped for parts to repair others. The DIY Museum in Polná

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<sup>16</sup> Museum kutilství Polná [Museum of DIY Polná], “O museu” [[About the museum](#)]; *Academický slovník současné češtiny online*, entry for “zlaté české ručičky / ruce” [[Academic Dictionary of Contemporary Czech Online, entry for “golden Czech hands”](#)].

<sup>17</sup> Email from Jan Podhajský, 10 May 2022.

houses an excellent example of such a Frankenstein creation: a homemade tractor from 1980 containing the motor of a ČZ 175 scooter manufactured in the early 1960s by Česká zbrojovka Strakonice; a gearbox from a Soviet Moskvíč 403 car; turn signals from a Škoda Octavia; and a steering wheel from a Škoda Embéček. Overlooking the one Soviet component, the museum describes the tractor as “a real Czech mishmash<sup>18</sup>.” This technological restriction born out of state planners’ desire for economic independence helped enable the sort of creative relationship to consumption that scholars have argued is a specific aspect of state socialist material culture (Scarboro, Mincyté, Gille, 2020). From one vantage point, it is extremely inefficient to rely exclusively on domestically produced parts to design commodities. From another, it is extremely inefficient to have such a diversity of commodities that their component parts are impossible to use interchangeably.

The highlight of my visit to the “kingdom of antique televisions” was seeing a home-made television from the 1950s (**Figure 3**), two decades before the boom in television production during normalisation. My *Teletým* hosts explained that it was constructed from found (or stolen) parts –an aluminium pipe from a ventilation system, copper wiring, a switch from an oven– none of which was originally intended to go in a television. The hobbyists had made a few tweaks and managed to get it in working condition once again. It had a small, green-tinted screen, no more than fifteen centimetres in diameter, and a long tube that extended back approximately sixty centimetres. During their restoration, the men had replaced the exterior casing with plexiglass to show off the complexity of the interior. As images flickered on the screen and I marvelled at the web of wires and tubes, the younger of my two hosts turned to me and said, “I think people were more skilled back then.” It was impossible not to agree that I was witnessing the results of enormously skilful work. To be sure, it was ingenuity born of constraints: why would someone invest all this time and effort in building a heavy, oddly shaped television if they could simply buy one from a store? We do not know who originally built this television, but it seems likely that the maker of the machine was respected for his hard work and creativity. Perhaps friends gathered around the small screen to excitedly watch crackly TV serials.

The *Teletým* hobbyists who reconstructed the machine are no doubt as skilled as its original maker, but their skills go largely unacknowledged, except among each other, and the fruits of their labour sit around them, in the basement, gathering dust. Their hobby represents a phenomenon different from other post-socialist DIY projects (for example, sprucing up *IKEA* furniture) because of its relationship with the past.

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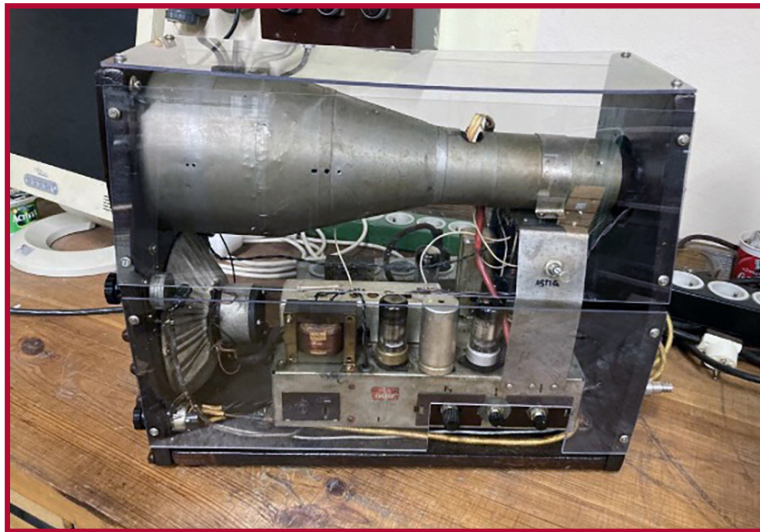
18 “[Malotraktor](#)” Muzeum kutilství Polná [Museum of DIY Polná].

The *Teletým* hobbyists still construct a form of masculinity through tinkering, although in contrast to socialist technical domestic masculinity, it is above all homosocial. The group hints at the implicit men-only nature of their club through a question-and-answer section of their newsletter:

“Question: Is there any porn that can be watched on antique televisions?”

Answer: We don’t know. If there is, please send it to us. We’d be interested for scientific reason” (Teletymak 2019).

A collective pornography screening would almost certainly be made awkward by the presence of women. Although these men engage in many of the same practices that marked men in the 1970s and 1980s as competent and desirable, today they are viewed as eccentric. This does not particularly bother them. As a closing farewell to their 2019 newsletter, the *Teletým* men write “We’re not normal, and that’s great”, along with a photo of themselves smiling and swigging beer (Teletymak 2019).



**Figure 3.** Home-made television c. 1950.

© Collection of Jan Podhajsky; Photography: Julia Mead 2022)

## Conclusion

This article has argued that a particular type of masculinity developed in Czechoslovakia during the late socialist period characterised by technical aptitude and creativity in undertaking household maintenance. This form of masculinity was constructed both *vis-à-vis* women and homosocially, and it was shaped by public discourse from psychology to television. Although many women no doubt possessed technical knowledge and skill through formal or informal education, technical

maintenance work was discursively associated with men and many individuals considered it to be an acceptably masculine domestic activity. Although it shares common features with DIY culture in other contexts, the relative scarcity of consumer goods and replacement parts, along with an abundance of cheap electricity, created the conditions of possibility for unique homemade gadgets.

Today in the Czech Republic, Do-It-Yourself tends to be associated with the socialist past, although DIY practices certainly continue. This temporal association is strengthened by groups of hobbyists who collect and repair socialist electronics and through museums that showcase homemade objects, particularly from the 1970s and 1980s. Based on interviews with members of one hobbyist group, *Teletým*, I have shown how socialist electronics continue to be a vehicle through which a particular technical masculinity is constructed. In the post-socialist period, however, this form of masculinity is more marginal. Finally, this article has emphasized the critical role of materiality the legacy of socialist electronics. These appliances continue to fascinate not because of their elegance or innovativeness, but because of their durability and adaptability.

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