THE GREAT LIE

Classic and Recent Appraisals of Ideology and Totalitarianism

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Jan Patočka versus Václav Benda (1989)

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I

Independent citizens' initiatives, independent culture, independent church structures, and so on, represent a radically new phenomenon which in the past twelve years has become a part of the Czechoslovakian reality that cannot be overlooked. Even if much of what we would include in this category—a wide range of cultural activity, for instance—has a prehistory of its own, it is undeniable that the declaration of Charter 77 in January 1977 was the decisive impulse towards independent activity of all kinds. In Czechoslovakian society—which at that time had been controlled by a Communist regime for almost thirty years and had been paralyzed since the late 1960s by the "normalization process"*—the emergence of the Charter was extremely important: it meant the restoration of a certain public space that was independent of the ruling power and unmanipulated by it. A "parallel polis" was constituted within a society that had been formed by totalitarianism.

Against the expectations of the skeptical, this community has proven to be an unusually vigorous social phenomenon. It has managed, so far, to defend its own existence, in the face of almost overwhelming odds,

* The stale, repressive period under Husák following the Prague Spring became known as the period of "normalization." For a powerful evocation of this time, see Havel's essay "Dear Dr. Husák," originally published in 1975.

against the attempt by the organs of power to destroy, or at least curtail it. Vasil Bil'ák* for all his talk about "the rubbish heap of history" and the express train that would crush the legs of those foolish enough it get in its way, has finally had to retire without seeing the "final solution" of the dissident question. It is highly probable that neither his colleagues who are still in power, nor their eventual replacements, will ever see their dream of crushing dissent come true. The fact is that the cause for which this parallel community came into being in the first place, and which remains its fundamental raison d'être—the defence of human rights and freedoms—has taken on an unexpected urgency. Regardless of the reasons for this—whether it was the activities of those in the parallel communities, or the fact that at the same time, the Americans elected President Reagan to a second term and Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power in Moscow, or simply because of the logic of historical development—the question of human rights is no longer just the concern of isolated groups of eccentric individuals and the humanitarian problems that constantly arise around them, but it is a domestic political question of the first order, and therefore one of the key elements on the agenda of international politics.

II

The philosopher Jan Patočka, one of the prime movers and ultimately one of the first spokesmen of Charter 77, wrote several texts in which he outlined what, in his opinion, the activity of Charter 77 was based on, what goals it ought to set for itself, and what means it ought to use to achieve those ends; in other words, "what the Charter is and what it is not." Patočka's exegesis seems to me the best place to start if we wish to find our bearings in the independent community that the Charter opened up.

According to its original declaration, Charter 77 saw itself as a "loose, informal, and open community of people of different convictions, different faiths, different professions, who are joined together by the determination to work, as individuals and together, for the respecting of civic and

* Vasil Bil'ák was a member of the Central Committee of the CPC. He supported the Soviet invasion of 1968, signed a letter inviting the Warsaw Pact countries to send military forces, and was closely associated with the "normalization" process that followed.

human rights both in our own country and in the world." But the appearance of Charter 77 cannot be understood as a political act, and therefore its significance cannot be measured by the usual political measurements. According to Patočka, what its signatories had in common was not anything political, but a certain *moral stance,* the conviction that human society cannot function satisfactorily if it does not rest on a moral foundation. Not only that, but without this moral foundation, society finds itself in danger of losing its integrity altogether, of losing that from which springs the very meaning of its existence. The point is, Patočka said, that morality "is not here to make society work, but so that *man can be man* [my emphasis]. It does not define man according to the whims of his wants and needs, his tendencies, and his longings, because morality itself is the very thing that defines man."

In Patočka's conception, the citizens who sign the Charter declaration are saying to those who run the state: "Govern, make sure the vital functions of the social organism run smoothly, but on one condition: that you unconditionally subordinate the exercise of that power to morality! Do not infringe upon the legal rights of those who, from your point of view, are powerless! And you must maintain this stance even when, and especially when, it is not in 'the interests of the state' to do so. You must recognize, at last, that the supremacy of morality over power is what makes human society human; it is the state's most elementary raison d'etre; it represents the only possible basis for that 'social contract' posited by the founders of modern political theory."

Patočka's conception of Charter 77, which in my opinion is generally accepted as "canonical" to this day, has left something essential unsaid, for obvious reasons, since Jan Patočka died in March of 1977, and therefore could not have analyzed the experiences undergone by Chartists in their effort to live out the consequences of this "moral stance" under totalitarian conditions. What is missing is an answer to the question: in what new situation does this event place both those who take direct part in it, and the rest of society, particularly the power structure, which was compelled to respond in some way to the existence of Charter 77, and still has to?

One of the first to attempt such a response was Václav Benda, who in 1978 published his essay on the parallel polis.

Benda argues that Patočka was right in pointing out the absolute preference for a moral stance over practical political considerations: a demand

to act not opportunistically, but *sub speciae aeterni,* was the basis on which the Charter stands. If, however, the Chartists, now that their cause is in motion, wish to find a guide that would allow them to keep their bearings and to act and make responsible decisions in the new situation, then Patočka's point of departure—because of its timeless abstraction from a concrete temporal horizon—is inadequate. According to Benda the task of the Chartists, and of all like-thinking people regardless of whether they signed the Charter or not, is this: to continue building the independent community that has thus come into being, to defend in every possible way the space it has managed to wrest for itself from the powers that be, and not to waste a single opportunity to expand it. How can this be achieved? By creating all kinds of independent parallel structures—that is, structures unmanipulated by totalitarian power: parallel information networks, cultural and educational institutions, parallel foreign contacts.

On the one hand, therefore, we have Patočka's perspective: the Charter is purely apolitical, a matter for *inner* decision of all those who take part; it appeals to something elementary and prepolitical, something that forms a basis for political behavior, but which is not in itself political. On the other hand we have Benda's point of view: in signing the Charter, each signatory in effect joins *other* signatories, and this, in effect, is a political act. Even though the Charter entered the world with unpolitical assumptions, it established a parallel polis, which is a political community, and this fact cannot simply be ignored or glossed over. Moreover, the intrinsically political nature of the Charter represents its most powerful weapon, enabling it to confront totalitarian power and realize its moral ideals even in unfavorable circumstances.

III

Patočka's exegesis of the Charter is strongly reminiscent of the Socratic point of view, of Socrates's way of coming to terms with social and political crisis in the Athens of his time. Before concerning yourself with public matters, Socrates urged his fellow citizens, pay heed to "reason and truth and the soul, so that they will be the best they can."* His concern for

* See Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, 29d–30a.

prepolitical matters is, in a certain sense, more important than political activity. According to Socrates, only a man alert to the truth, a man of inner discipline, integrity and responsibility, is capable of being a good citizen, or rather a politician.

It seems to me that something quite similar echoes from the words of Patočka's conversations on the nonpolitical character of Charter 77. Anyone who publicly supports the Charter with his or her signature has, in effect, sent this message to those who hold power: I hereby retire from the game you've been forcing on the people of this country. It is a false and immoral game, and I've simply had enough.

Just as Socrates did not take part in the degenerate political life in Athens, but instead spent his time talking with his fellow citizens, mainly the young, examining the assumptions on which some future political action might be based, so Patočka claimed that the Chartists have nothing to do with politics, as it is generally understood, a politics that thinks only of power and acts from motives of success and fear. "Those who participate in the Charter," Patočka wrote, "are not only not taking unto themselves any political right or function; they are not even attempting to be a moral authority or the 'conscience' of society. They are not placing themselves over others, nor judging anyone. Their only effort is to purify and strengthen their awareness that a higher authority exists, in which individuals are bound by their consciences, and states by their signatures, on important international agreements; and that they are so bound not in any opportunistic sense, according to the rules of political advantage and disadvantage, but their signature here means a commitment to see that politics is subordinate to law, and not law to politics."

But let us carry the analogy a step further. The figure of Socrates is far more paradoxical, for although he refuses to take part in politics, although he, figuratively speaking, retreats from the public square of Athens into the back streets, where he carries on conversations that have nothing to do with the political agenda of the day, it is he who, in the end, comes to embody Athenian virtues that are, in the true sense of the word, political. Such virtues had been gradually disappearing from Athenian public life. Socrates towers above the grey Athenians around him because he has an active interest not just in private matters, but also in matters he believes to be important to the community. It is Socrates, and not those who condemn him, who is capable of the activity which puts him in danger of los-

ing his life. Nor does he retreat, but prefers death to giving up his cause. "Citizens of Athens," says this apolitical philosopher before the court, "either you believe Anytus or you believe me; and either you free me or you don't, but I can assure you that I would not change what I have done even if I were to die a hundred times for it."

Perhaps it will not sound like an exaggeration if I say that Jan Patočka, too, ended his life as a philosopher in the Socratic mould; as a philosopher who withdrew from the *Agora,* from the place that represented the center of political life, not because he surrendered it to irresponsible usurpers and politicians blinded by power, so he could go on philosophizing somewhere in peace, but in order to reveal, and even at the cost of his life, once more to make public the meaning of political activity, the only thing that can become the cornerstone of any future political sphere.

There is only one sense in which our analogy falters. Whereas Socrates was unsuccessful in his political reform of Athens, and instead became the founder of a European philosophical tradition, Patočka's philosophical act changed the public face of his society in a genuinely essential way. Within a community that had been paralyzed for decades by totalitarian mechanisms, and whose citizens appeared to be asleep, enchanted by some black magic, a new community was awakened, independent of the first one. It is this fact, this heritage, left behind by the philosopher, to which Václav Benda turns his attention with such urgency.

IV

Regardless of how influential Patočka's thinking was, the independent community that arose from it is in no sense a community of philosophers. On the contrary, the great majority of those who live in it don't think philosophically, nor are they in any particular way interested in philosophy. To the question what is keeping them together, then, despite vast individual differences, a single answer may be given: it is precisely what the totalitarian system denies them in the first place—freedom.

Are we not offered a prototype, through which we can come close to the events in that polis which Benda described by the adjective "parallel," precisely in the polis of ancient times, in the ideal of civil freedom on which it is based, and in the political action for which it opens up space?

But today there is one basic difference. If we mention freedom, we almost automatically assume that it means *freedom of will,* that quality of an individual who is free to the extent that he acts according to his own lights, his own decisions, and, on the contrary, resists submitting to arbitrary decisions forced on him from outside. Whether this will is conceived of as mere willfulness (i.e., the power to do whatever one wants), or whether one sees it as the capacity to submit voluntarily to a higher principle and act in accord with one's responsibilities, either to God, or to oneself, or to one's humanity—in one aspect the same thing is always involved.

For man to be free, he must disengage himself from all external things, the course of which he cannot influence anyway, and withdraw into himself: this is what the Stoic philosopher advises.

Do not love this world, take no care for its fleeting glories, rewards or wisdom, and cleave entirely to eternal truths, to one's God, in expectation of His Kingdom. Only that will make you free: this is what Christian faith says.

Freedom is primarily freedom from politics, and consists in the guarantees that every individual must have, so that he may in peace and security devote his energies to his private affairs: this is what the theoreticians of liberalism claim.

Don't get mixed up in anything and look out for yourself: this is the decadent opinion of modern bourgeois man.

However different these points of view are, the point on which they agree is obvious: freedom is something that is directed inwards, away from a world that has succumbed to vanity, from the labyrinth of the world to the paradise of the heart, to the cultivation of one's immortal soul, from public affairs towards private interests.

I would say that the Greek notion of freedom was just the opposite. The citizen of Athens was not free when he was by himself, his own master, among his possessions, in private, where, in our modern view of things, he could do what he wanted. On the contrary, he became free the moment he left this private space and went out into the community—when he spent his time, not among those whom the gods had endowed with power over him, but among his equals, his fellow citizens, with those who were as free as he was. It was important not just that he had the right to take part in public affairs, that he could speak in the *agora* or do what he thought

was for the good of the community, but also the fact that he did so in the presence of others, who at the same time could see him and hear him, and judge his actions and his words, who could either agree with him, or oppose him, yet always recognizing him as a free person capable of free action.

Unlike our conception, this notion of freedom was essentially political. It was not free will, but rather free *initiative*. It did not depend merely on the abilities or qualities of isolated individuals, on their private possibilities or outlooks, but it was conditional on the freedom of others around him. It was not a matter of the state of one's soul, but rather on the state of the world.

It seems to me that precisely here is the core of the argument that Benda opposes to Patočka's conception of Charter 77. For Benda, what creates the identity of the "dissident," what differentiates the citizen of the independent community from the other members of society, does not consist in any higher morality or greater love of truth, nor in his ability to carry on a philosophical dialogue, but in his conception of freedom. There are people who have ceased to perceive freedom, as those around them do, as free will (which one can cultivate in private) and have once again begun to understand it in the Greek way: as something essentially political, as initiative. These are not apolitical people, as Patočka stressed; far from it. On the contrary, they are people who, thanks to their experience with totalitarianism, which utterly deprived them of a political dimension to their lives, have rediscovered and are now experiencing that which politics originally was. They have experienced the meaning of free behavior.

In this situation, the decision to create a parallel polis cannot be understood as a step away from the world, as an escape from the contemporary crisis, which is first and foremost a political crisis. On the contrary, it is a step into the world, to the very focus of what is happening, into politics, a step taken in the belief that it is only personal risk and personal initiative, regardless of how meaningless and unimportant it may seem to the powers that rule this world, that can bring about a cure.

The place of the independent community in the wider context of Czech history can be determined only by the future. Perhaps much of what today seems important and fascinating to us, the things we talk and worry about, will prove to be merely marginal and will, in time, be forgotten. And on the contrary, perhaps something we are overlooking,

something that is quietly and secretly at work among us, may with the distance of time become apparent. But there is one thing I believe can be said with certainty now: that the motives which brought the parallel polis into existence and thanks to which those who live in it have been moved to action, which changed the course of their lives in decisive ways, will certainly remain. For I believe that these motives are, at least from the human perspective, eternal.