

9 The alternative community as revolutionary avant-garde*

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The social system in which I live can, from the economic point of view, be described as bureaucratic centralism and, from the political point of view, a bureaucratic dictatorship. The system developed as a revolutionary rejection of the capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois political system. The social revolution was inconsistent, however, and from the outset was distorted by Stalinism. Both politically and economically it led to an even greater subjugation of workers than had been the case under capitalism and bourgeois democracy. Both capitalism and Stalinism, in fact, display common features: the reification of labour, the manipulation of those who carry out that labour and of the entire society, the political and economic expropriation of workers and the feeling of alienation. Even so, the essence of capitalism and bureaucratic centralism is different.

In the latter, the central class contradiction is the conflict between the ruling bureaucratic centre supported by a hierarchical bureaucracy and the working people of various social classes and strata. The fundamental social conflict is between the nature of work, on the one hand, and the disposition of the means of production, the forces of production, commodities and non-productive property on the other. A narrow segment of society decides centrally on the means and forces of production, and on commodities and non-productive property, whereas the workers, who create these values, are entirely excluded from the decision-making process.

The two focal characteristics of the system of bureaucratic dictatorship are its totality and its centralism. The confusion of totalitarianism of the Stalinist-bureaucratic type with dictatorships developing out of other social and production relations is superficial

* Translated by Paul Wilson.

and harmful. Stalinist bureaucratic dictatorship and bureaucratic centralism in Czechoslovakia were established according to the Soviet model. As in the other countries in the Soviet bloc, Czechoslovak bureaucratic centralism is subordinated to the Moscow centre, which expresses the interests not only of the Soviet bureaucracy, but also of the individual national bureaucracies. The actions of the Czechoslovak bureaucracy and its centre are not, therefore, entirely imposed upon them by dictatorial fiat. The relationship between Moscow and its subject states is better described as one of co-operation, despite disagreement and controversy. The Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia are only a reserve force and have no direct influence on internal developments in Czechoslovakia.

Historically, the central European nations are going through a period of transition between a stage of overcoming the capitalist mode of production and the future socialist development, which is the first phase of communism. Stalinism, which represents one of the most bestial periods in history, is a blind alley.

A dilemma facing the bureaucracy is the contradiction between its attempt to preserve the status quo and therefore to survive as a bureaucracy, and the need for social changes, particularly in the fields of culture and economics. The institutions of bureaucratic centralism are unreformable, but minor improvements within the framework of the system are important because they encourage the development of a critical spirit, a mood of opposition, and embryonic structures independent of the state. Reforms in themselves have limitations that are well-known: they always stop – or are repressed by terror – when they touch on fundamental solutions to social contradictions. In this sense every attempt at reform has a revolutionary aspect to it, for it reveals the illusory nature of reform and strengthens the growth of a revolutionary consciousness.

At a certain stage of development, the societies of eastern Europe are going to have to face up to the necessity of eliminating the bureaucratic dictatorship. This social change, even were it to disrupt bureaucratic power over a period of several months, will radically affect all the present institutions of power, disrupt the relationships between them and, ultimately, destroy them. Therefore it is correct to term this overthrowing of bureaucratic power a revolutionary process.

The anti-bureaucratic revolution will be chiefly a political revolution. By removing bureaucratic obstacles to economic development, it will transform considerably the relations of production by, in a

sense, completing the revolutionary process that was going on between 1945 and 1948. In other words, it will begin to socialize the means of production. It will not destroy any social class (the bureaucracy must be considered a strata, not a class) and therefore it cannot be called a social revolution. It will also be – chiefly in terms of its consequences – a cultural revolution that will alter interpersonal relationships and relations between people and things.

The revolution will necessarily be accompanied by violence, but if it is well organized, this need not degenerate into brutality nor, even less, into terror. Revolutions do not happen because revolutionaries call for them, nor are they a result of indoctrinating the masses. They happen when people choose violence and use it to take power away from those who hold it. They happen when the broadest strata of people can no longer bear their oppression, when the incompetence of the rulers goes hand in hand with brutality and terror. The role of the revolutionaries is to indicate to the masses in revolt the best way to go which means, among other things, trying to limit revolutionary violence to the smallest necessary degree and consistently opposing brutality and terror, which even when it is a necessary factor in the revolution's survival, damages the revolutionary process because it tends to degenerate it.

There are many conceivable varieties of the revolutionary process, both internally and internationally. The anti-bureaucratic revolution in Czechoslovakia, however, can only hope to succeed if it does not limit itself to this country, but becomes part of an international revolutionary process.

History has shown that anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic revolution has always favoured self-management, frequently posing self-management as the only possible framework for the new organization of life. This was so in the pre-revolutionary ferment among Czechoslovak workers in 1968–9, and it will be so in the Czechoslovak anti-bureaucratic revolution, where of course a parliamentary or other representative system may emerge parallel to it and even dominate it for a time.

Parliamentary government means government by the leadership (i.e. of representatives, a presidium or a politbureau) of one or more political parties. At the same time, parliamentary government does nothing to develop forms of direct democracy which can help emancipate society and individuals and overcome alienation. Social (not merely economic) self-management is, on the other hand, a combination of direct and indirect forms of democracy. Indirect

(representative) democracy means a system of workers (and other) councils, horizontally co-ordinated, which would invest authority in a general council to replace today's legislative and executive state organs. It would be a democracy of the productive forces complemented by the territorial principle. The indirect democracy would be complemented by elements of direct democracy: referenda, even at the local level, public opinion polls whose results are binding, the direct administration of things by groups of people, and so on. Social self-management is not a panacea: it is only worthy of support if it guarantees the continual expansion of direct democracy in favour of the gradual dismantling of representative democracy. The self-management system is consistently pluralistic: political parties, which would function more as political clubs or movements, would present proposals but would not actually run society, as they do in the bourgeois democratic system.

In the crisis that will precede the revolutionary process, organs of self-management will appear in the workplaces: strike committees, revived trade unions, workers' councils. Their activities will have to be co-ordinated with that of workers in other enterprises so that a workers' council with society-wide authority can be created as rapidly as possible. The workers – and eventually other citizens as well – must be able to take over the military and reconstruct it to fall in line with the economic structure of the country. The permanent standing army and the police will also be abolished. And, finally, it is important that self-management be not limited to the economic sphere but that workers' councils become centres of political power, causing a further decentralization of power and the creation of many different foci of popular initiative.

The driving force in the revolutionary society will be its contradictions: the political antagonism, already material, between the parliamentary system and self-management and, in the economic sphere, between the technocratic and democratic production tendencies. There will also be conflicts between nationalist and internationalist concepts, between different notions of consumerism and ecology, conflicts over competence and problems of the emergent particularism of confederated producers, and so on.

The future course of events depends not only on the degree to which living conditions remain bearable and on the international situation, but also on the daily activity of each of us. And that, in turn, depends not only on our abilities, education and vision, but on our determination and will to transform the social conditions in which we live.

Václav Benda, a Catholic intellectual and revolutionary democrat, has written an essay, *Parallel Polis*,* in which he essentially calls for organized, parallel activities independent of the state, in which the various currents gradually form a broad, unlimited association of people, a community, a *polis*. Benda's essay met with a positive response from the Czechoslovak opposition. His project was based on his experiences in Charter 77 and on the experiences of the Czech cultural underground and other movements and initiatives, though he was certainly looking at the Polish experience as well. Benda's project is reminiscent of 'alternative' social activities in capitalist societies. There, however, they have an ambivalent character. Under a bureaucratic dictatorship the 'parallel polis' is different in many ways.

In capitalist society, alternative life-styles and communities are created without regard for 'the establishment', that is, for the rest of society and its organizations. They simply exist alongside society and in no way try to disturb it. The political establishment leaves these groups alone: they are a welcome safety valve that drains away some of the general discontent with social conditions. The hallmarks of alternative communities in the capitalist world are political and social passivity, the exclusivity of the voluntary ghetto and escape from the real world. It would be wrong, however, to see the notion of 'alternatives' as a reactionary utopia. Alternative communities provide the soil in which is nurtured the critical spirit that can influence the whole of society. They have a potential in the future anti-capitalist revolutionary process, for they are ultimately a potential corrective to the future revolution and represent the hope that it will not be crippled by bureaucratic degeneration.

In its liberal and bourgeois-democratic forms, capitalism can coexist with these alternative ghettos. Bureaucratic dictatorships of the Stalinist type cannot. Here any form of expression that is not under bureaucratic control is necessarily disruptive. Every independent act, both individual and, even more, collective, consequently provokes conflict with bureaucratic power, regardless of whether it is deliberately aimed against the system or whether it merely desires to exist *an sich*, 'outside', without provoking conflicts. Constant

* *Editor's note:* Václav Benda's highly influential *Parallel Polis* was written in May, 1978, and thereafter circulated in *samizdat* form in Czechoslovakia. An English translation is published in *Palach Press Bulletin* (London, 1979).

effort at achieving independent (critical) expression or independent forms of living means constant conflict with state power, and that in turn broadens and deepens people's awareness. The associations which thus arise – like Charter 77, the Czech cultural underground, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, the Charter working groups and other semi-official and unofficial associations of friends – create internal relationships, rather like a club, movement or organization, which offer a genuine alternative to the forms of social life that have been fettered and deformed by bureaucratic power and the middle-class conventions it supports. Benda's 'parallel structures' should therefore really be called *alternative* structures or an *alternative* polis, just as communities in the western sense may frequently, with more accuracy, be termed *parallel* organisms.

The capacity to evoke conflict and social awareness is the primary justification for alternative forms of living or, if you like, of the 'parallel polis'. The second condition is openness, both in principle and in practice, in the sense that more and more people should be able to participate. Moreover, the alternative society should have an influence on people who do not participate directly in its work. This openness is not merely a consequence of conscious will; it is also a result of the balance of power between the alternative movement and the state that is trying to shut it away in a ghetto.

The Czech cultural underground is an association or movement that seeks an alternative to consumerism, middle-class attitudes and hypocritical morality. It attempts to fulfill itself through independent cultural expressions. In this it is closer to alternative communities of the western type than Charter 77, which has no equivalent in the bourgeois democracies. Nevertheless, the condition of 'automatic' conflict holds true and it would seem that the underground is, in many ways, more open than Charter 77, which though professing openness, has so far been kept in relative isolation by the repressive apparatus. However, there are negative expressions of the 'western type' to be found in the Czech cultural underground as well: its mere existence seems to be a reason for self-congratulation, and there is an exclusiveness about it, an escape from its inability to solve practical problems into the world of dreams. The underground, however, is aware of the danger in these tendencies, and this promises further development.

Negative 'ghetto' qualities have affected Charter 77 as well. The stress on Chartist morality and the explanation of Charter 77,

incorrectly, as the consequence of a sudden decision to 'live within the truth' (both vulgarizations of Jan Patočka's intellectual heritage), create the feeling of moral exclusivity among the Charterists. As Václav Havel points out, the signatories of Charter 77 are just like the rest of the population; the only difference is that they say out loud what the rest only think. The conditions of life are compelling people to say what they think more and more frequently and loudly.

It would be wrong to claim that the idea of a parallel *polis* is accepted by all signatories of Charter 77. There are still powerful reformist currents inside the Charter and the Czechoslovak opposition. Interestingly, young people in the Czech cultural underground criticize these reform efforts as 'political' while, in fact, they are the ones making the real politics, or at least anticipating it, if we understand politics as an effort to emancipate the oppressed and the manipulated, and do not confuse politics with a desire for power. Although a critique of this reformist trend does not fall within the scope of my essay, it is worth noting that a spirit of conspiracy, sectarianism and 'moral' exclusivity is a feature of the reformist environment. Conspiratorial methods, often the only possible way to get things done given the conditions in Czechoslovakia, considerably slow down the evolution of alternative projects like the parallel *polis*. The principle of operating in the open, which Charter 77 established to a broader extent, must be strengthened and extended.

Self-organization is one essential condition for the further development of alternative communities. The approaches taken in Poland between 1976 and 1979 cannot be imported mechanically to Czechoslovakia because it is technically impossible, although there is nothing to prevent us trying to apply the Polish experience to a far more modest extent everywhere possible.

In any community, democracy is created through democratic rules. Such rules will only work, however, if the community is organized. Thus, if alternative communities are to be the embryos of a future society, democracy *and* self-organization are utterly essential. Self-organization must gradually push out spontaneity.

Should the alternative movement limit its sphere of interest to human rights? Charter 77 is so limited while the Czech cultural underground has already directly realized some democratic freedoms. The Charter is limited because under the existing social conditions, it cannot force the regime to recognize some of the rights enshrined in international covenants. Yet it can achieve minor

successes in the area of human rights. Its main significance, however, lies in the fact that it is helping to bring closer a gradual recognition of all the natural rights of human beings, which I consider to be the real point of such a revolution. It is also becoming more and more an alternative community that anticipates the future. The Czech underground has a role similar to that of Charter 77 but, even more than the Charter, it is a school of independence even though it will never achieve the emancipation for which it strives. As the creation of Solidarity in Poland indicates, the parallel *polis* can potentially expand to include the trade union movement, the Church, the student movement, the school system, and even include local government and agricultural production. It would seem, however, that as soon as it touches economic questions, a showdown with the bureaucratic power takes place. Thus, I do not see alternative modes of production, transportation, trade and even an educational system as practicable. It would be more natural to bring the economy under the control of democratic organizations that have been established and tested during the parallel *polis* phase. An alliance of producers would provide an alternative to bureaucratic centralism. The relationship between an official (state) economy and its alternative, however, cannot be a parallel one: they will be separated by revolutionary transformation.

It is wrong to imagine that under a bureaucratic dictatorship alternative associations will continue to grow until they affect practically the whole of society. It is utopian to assume that society will 'merge' with the parallel *polis*, thus causing the withering away of the state and its bureaucratic machinery. On the contrary, the parallel *polis* will always be a minority phenomenon. It is only during the revolutionary process that it will rapidly 'absorb' society, which will create, on the islands of alternative associations and activities, a *polis* which is no longer parallel, but an authentic *polis* of free people. Therefore both the quality of the alternative associations of today (their inner *democratic* and anti-authoritarian structure) and their orientation towards creative work and working relationships, are immensely important, for working relationships stand to be changed most by the anti-bureaucratic revolution, and this will happen in the way suggested by pre-revolutionary, alternative activity.

Except for the field of economics, where we will have to be content with preparatory work (activity in independent unions, demands for workers' control), and except for alternative activities

of a peripheral nature (particularly in the cultural field, in the production of books and magazines, but also in common work, construction, etc.), alternative activity will thus affect all areas of social life. This is even true of foreign policy: an alternative foreign policy is an essential condition in any parallel *polis* that tries to be a genuine alternative. Relationships between Charter 77 and the Polish democratic opposition have immensely strengthened Charter 77. It makes us feel good to know that Polish workers, students and Catholics are on our side. And that feeling comes after the first handshakes, the first hours of conversation, the first months of thinking about Polish and other common problems. These contacts should result in concrete common ideas about future relations and modes of co-operation between the populations of Poland and Czechoslovakia, about the future elements of an international *polis*. An alliance of individual national alternative communities, which must not remain limited to Poland and Czechoslovakia, is today a powerful anti-bureaucratic factor, and is an essential condition for any future revolutionary process.

The use of the term 'citizens' initiative' for the theme of this collection of essays has different shades of meaning. The word 'initiative' usually refers to an impulse, an action or a campaign, and is not very appropriate for an unorganized, spontaneous movement such as the Czech cultural underground, for an institutionalized association of people with a limited range of activities such as Charter 77, or even for an organization with specific aims like the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted. For the future, we must also be thinking about 'initiatives' like independent trade unions, political discussion clubs and parties. The term 'citizens' initiative', which unfortunately does not express the lasting nature of the alternative associations, is used in Czechoslovakia to stress that a given association is not an organization. At the same time, it is precisely the lack of such organization that is the Czechoslovak human rights movement's greatest weakness. The word 'citizen' is equally inappropriate: today, a citizen is understood more as the subject of a state than as the member of a community (the Czech language preserves that original sense of the word: citizen - *občan*; community - *obec*); civil rights are only an aspect of human rights. This is why I use the expression 'alternative community' rather than 'citizens' initiative'.

History suggests that the revolutionary process which is awaiting Czechoslovakian society will be more peaceful and orderly to the

extent that it is organized, that is, if the people who bring it about can agree on the most acceptable forms of revolution (which, among other things, will limit violence to a minimum), and if they can create structures that will make such an agreement possible. In the past, the avant-garde, usually a revolutionary party, has assumed the role of organizer. However, in all independent or independent proletarian revolutions (Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Cuba) this party always became the cradle of a bureaucracy. It seems that in eastern Europe this lesson has been learned. Only a community consisting of both informal and institutionalized groups with experience in action and practice can become the new type of avant-garde that can genuinely express the main interests of oppressed society. In such a revolutionary avant-garde, various alternative associations can join forces informally. Such revolutionary associations do not exclude the organizing of various groups, and perhaps even of political parties. On the contrary, such groups, often in connection with other groups, may play an important role in the anti-bureaucratic struggle. In the conditions in which we live, they will frequently regroup and divide, unite and separate once again. This will not harm the cause. Most of those changes need not be institutionalized at all, for their influence will spread among representatives of groups or trends. Public opinion itself will judge which of the points of view it will accept, whom it will support, from whom it will accept advice, in other words, who in the given situation best fulfils the role of the revolutionary avant-garde. The question should not be who this avant-garde is, but which problems are being dealt with, by which alternative association (or community), and in what way? These questions are asked by the revolutionary avant-garde itself, particularly when its component parts – the individual alternative associations – work closely together and accept the need for a certain institutional expression. In Charter 77 each group, circle, current or more or less accidental grouping of friends is revolutionary in its own way, whether it realizes this or not.

In a bureaucratic dictatorship, therefore, the revolutionary avant-garde of society is located in the independent alternative associations, in their national and international alliances, in their improvement and expansion, in their rapid proliferation, and in their impact on society as a whole. This is the beginning of the revolutionary process.