

Vaclav Havel's "The Power of the Powerless"

"The Power of the Powerless" (October 1978) was originally written as a discussion piece for a projected joint Polish Czechoslovak volume of essays on the subject of freedom and power. All the participants were to receive Havel's essay, and then respond to it in writing. Twenty participants were chosen on both sides, but only the Czechoslovak side was completed. Meanwhile, in May 1979, some of the Czechoslovak contributors, including Havel, were arrested, and it was decided to go ahead and "publish" the Czechoslovak contributions separately.

Havel's essay has had a profound impact on Eastern Europe. Zbigniew Bujak, a Solidarity activist, said: "This essay reached us in the Ursus factory in 1979 at a point when we felt we were at the end of the road. Inspired by KOR [the Polish Workers' Defense Committee], we had been speaking on the shop floor, talking to people, participating in public meetings, trying to speak the truth about the factory, the country, and politics. There came a moment when people thought we were crazy. Why were we doing this? Why were we taking such risks? Not seeing any immediate and tangible results, we began to doubt the purposefulness of what we were doing. Shouldn't we be coming up with other methods, other ways?"

Then came the essay by Havel. Reading it gave us the theoretical underpinnings for our activity. It maintained our spirits; we did not give up, and a year later - in August 1980 - it became clear that the party apparatus and the factory management were afraid of us. We mattered. And the rank and file saw us as leaders of the movement. When I look at the victories of Solidarity, and of Charter 77, I see in them an astonishing fulfillment of the prophecies and knowledge contained in Havel's essay."

I

A specter is haunting Eastern Europe: the specter of what in the West is called "dissent" This specter has not appeared out of thin air. It is a natural and inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system it is haunting. It was born at a time when this system, for a thousand reasons, can no longer base itself on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power, eliminating all expressions of nonconformity. What is more, the system has become so ossified politically that there is practically no way for such nonconformity to be implemented within its official structures.

Who are these so-called dissidents? Where does their point of view come from, and what importance does it have? What is the significance of the "independent initiatives" in which "dissidents" collaborate, and what real chances do such initiatives have of success? Is it appropriate to refer to "dissidents" as an opposition? If so, what exactly is such an opposition within the framework of this system? What does it do? What role does it play in society? What are its hopes and on what are they based? Is it within the power of the

"dissidents"-as a category of subcitizen outside the power establishment-to have any influence at all on society and the social system? Can they actually change anything?

I think that an examination of these questions-an examination of the potential of the "powerless"-can only begin with an examination of the nature of power in the circumstances in which these powerless people operate.

...

III

The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: "Workers of the world, unite!" Why does he do it? What is he trying to communicate to the world? Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment's thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?

I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life "in harmony with society," as they say.

Obviously the greengrocer is indifferent to the semantic content of the slogan on exhibit; he does not put the slogan in his window from any personal desire to acquaint the public with the ideal it expresses. This, of course, does not mean that his action has no motive or significance at all, or that the slogan communicates nothing to anyone. The slogan is really a sign, and as such it contains a subliminal but very definite message. Verbally, it might be expressed this way: "I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace." This message, of course, has an addressee: it is directed above, to the greengrocer's superior, and at the same time it is a shield that protects the greengrocer from potential informers. The slogan's real meaning, therefore, is rooted firmly in the greengrocer's existence. It reflects his vital interests. But what are those vital interests?

Let us take note: if the greengrocer had been instructed to display the slogan "I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient," he would not be nearly as indifferent to its semantics, even though the statement would reflect the truth. The greengrocer would be embarrassed and ashamed to put such an unequivocal statement of his own degradation in the shop window, and quite naturally so, for he is a human being and thus has a sense of

his own dignity. To overcome his complication, his expression of loyalty must take the form of a sign which, at least on its textual surface, indicates a level of disinterested conviction. It must allow the greengrocer to say, "What's wrong with the workers of the world uniting?" Thus the sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high. And that something is ideology.

Ideology is a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them. As the repository of something suprapersonal and objective, it enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position and their inglorious modus vivendi, both from the world and from themselves. It is a very pragmatic but, at the same time, an apparently dignified way of legitimizing what is above, below, and on either side. It is directed toward people and toward God. It is a veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo. It is an excuse that everyone can use, from the greengrocer, who conceals his fear of losing his job behind an alleged interest in the unification of the workers of the world, to the highest functionary, whose interest in staying in power can be cloaked in phrases about service to the working class. The primary excusatory function of ideology, therefore, is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe.

The smaller a dictatorship and the less stratified by modernization the society under it, the more directly the will of the dictator can be exercised. In other words, the dictator can employ more or less naked discipline, avoiding the complex processes of relating to the world and of self-justification which ideology involves. But the more complex the mechanisms of power become, the larger and more stratified the society they embrace, and the longer they have operated historically, the more individuals must be connected to them from outside, and the greater the importance attached to the ideological excuse. It acts as a kind of bridge between the regime and the people, across which the regime approaches the people and the people approach the regime. This explains why ideology plays such an important role in the post-totalitarian system: that complex machinery of units, hierarchies, transmission belts, and indirect instruments of manipulation which ensure in countless ways the integrity of the regime, leaving nothing to chance, would be quite simply unthinkable without ideology acting as its all-embracing excuse and as the excuse for each of its parts.

IV

Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self organization, in short, toward the fulfillment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline. While life ever strives to create new and improbable structures, the post-totalitarian system contrives to force life into its most probable states. The aims of the system reveal its most essential characteristic to be introversion, a movement toward being ever more completely and unreservedly itself, which means that the radius of its influence is continually widening

as well. This system serves people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it. Anything beyond this, that is to say, anything which leads people to overstep their predetermined roles is regarded by the system as an attack upon itself. And in this respect it is correct: every instance of such transgression is a genuine denial of the system. It can be said, therefore, that the inner aim of the post-totalitarian system is not mere preservation of power in the hands of a ruling clique, as appears to be the case at first sight. Rather, the social phenomenon of self-preservation is subordinated to something higher, to a kind of blind automatism which drives the system. No matter what position individuals hold in the hierarchy of power, they are not considered by the system to be worth anything in themselves, but only as things intended to fuel and serve this automatism. For this reason, an individual's desire for power is admissible only in so far as its direction coincides with the direction of the automatism of the system.

Ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life. It pretends that the requirements of the system derive from the requirements of life. It is a world of appearances trying to pass for reality.

The post-totalitarian system touches people at every step, but it does so with its ideological gloves on. This is why life in the system is so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies: government by bureaucracy is called popular government; the working class is enslaved in the name of the working class; the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his ultimate liberation; depriving people of information is called making it available; the use of power to manipulate is called the public control of power, and the arbitrary abuse of power is called observing the legal code; the repression of culture is called its development; the expansion of imperial influence is presented as support for the oppressed; the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom; farcical elections become the highest form of democracy; banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views; military occupation becomes fraternal assistance. Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.

Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, are the system.

...

VI

Why in fact did our greengrocer have to put his loyalty on display in the shop window? Had he not already displayed it sufficiently in various internal or semipublic ways? At

trade union meetings, after all, he had always voted as he should. He had always taken part in various competitions. He voted in elections like a good citizen. He had even signed the "antiCharter." Why, on top of all that, should he have to declare his loyalty publicly? After all, the people who walk past his window will certainly not stop to read that, in the greengrocer's opinion, the workers of the world ought to unite. The fact of the matter is, they don't read the slogan at all, and it can be fairly assumed they don't even see it. If you were to ask a woman who had stopped in front of his shop what she saw in the window, she could certainly tell whether or not they had tomatoes today, but it is highly unlikely that she noticed the slogan at all, let alone what it said.

It seems senseless to require the greengrocer to declare his loyalty publicly. But it makes sense nevertheless. People ignore his slogan, but they do so because such slogans are also found in other shop windows, on lampposts, bulletin boards, in apartment windows, and on buildings; they are everywhere, in fact. They form part of the panorama of everyday life. Of course, while they ignore the details, people are very aware of that panorama as a whole. And what else is the greengrocer's slogan but a small component in that huge backdrop to daily life?

The greengrocer had to put the slogan in his window, therefore, not in the hope that someone might read it or be persuaded by it, but to contribute, along with thousands of other slogans, to the panorama that everyone is very much aware of. This panorama, of course, has a subliminal meaning as well: it reminds people where they are living and what is expected of them. It tells them what everyone else is doing, and indicates to them what they must do as well, if they don't want to be excluded, to fall into isolation, alienate themselves from society, break the rules of the game, and risk the loss of their peace and tranquility and security.

The woman who ignored the greengrocer's slogan may well have hung a similar slogan just an hour before in the corridor of the office where she works. She did it more or less without thinking, just as our greengrocer did, and she could do so precisely because she was doing it against the background of the general panorama and with some awareness of it, that is, against the background of the panorama of which the greengrocer's shop window forms a part. When the greengrocer visits her office, he will not notice her slogan either, just as she failed to notice his. Nevertheless, their slogans are mutually dependent: both were displayed with some awareness of the general panorama and, we might say, under its diktat. Both, however, assist in the creation of that panorama, and therefore they assist in the creation of that diktat as well. The greengrocer and the office worker have both adapted to the conditions in which they live, but in doing so, they help to create those conditions. They do what is done, what is to be done, what must be done, but at the same time-by that very token-they confirm that it must be done in fact. They conform to a particular requirement and in so doing they themselves perpetuate that requirement. Metaphysically speaking, without the greengrocer's slogan the office worker's slogan could not exist, and vice versa. Each proposes to the other that something be repeated and each accepts the other's proposal. Their mutual indifference to each other's slogans is only an illusion: in reality, by exhibiting their slogans, each compels the other to accept the rules of the game and to confirm thereby the power that requires the

slogans in the first place. Quite simply, each helps the other to be obedient. Both are objects in a system of control, but at the same time they are its subjects as well. They are both victims of the system and its instruments.

If an entire district town is plastered with slogans that no one reads, it is on the one hand a message from the district secretary to the regional secretary, but it is also something more: a small example of the principle of social auto-totality at work. Part of the essence of the post-totalitarian system is that it draws everyone into its sphere of power, not so they may realize themselves as human beings, but so they may surrender their human identity in favor of the identity of the system, that is, so they may become agents of the system's general automatism and servants of its self-determined goals, so they may participate in the common responsibility for it, so they may be pulled into and ensnared by it, like Faust by Mephistopheles. More than this: so they may create through their involvement a general norm and, thus, bring pressure to bear on their fellow citizens. And further: so they may learn to be comfortable with their involvement, to identify with it as though it were something natural and inevitable and, ultimately, so they may-with no external urging-come to treat any non-involvement as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society. By pulling everyone into its power structure, the post-totalitarian system makes everyone an instrument of a mutual totality, the auto-totality of society.

Everyone, however, is in fact involved and enslaved, not only the greengrocers but also the prime ministers. Differing positions in the hierarchy merely establish differing degrees of involvement: the greengrocer is involved only to a minor extent, but he also has very little power. The prime minister, naturally, has greater power, but in return he is far more deeply involved. Both, however, are unfree, each merely in a somewhat different way. The real accomplice in this involvement, therefore, is not another person, but the system itself.

Position in the power hierarchy determines the degree of responsibility and guilt, but it gives no one unlimited responsibility and guilt, nor does it completely absolve anyone. Thus the conflict between the aims of life and the aims of the system is not a conflict between two socially defined and separate communities; and only a very generalized view (and even that only approximative) permits us to divide society into the rulers and the ruled. Here, by the way, is one of the most important differences between the post-totalitarian system and classical dictatorships, in which this line of conflict can still be drawn according to social class. In the post-totalitarian system, this line runs de facto through each person, for everyone in his own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system. What we understand by the system is not, therefore, a social order imposed by one group upon another, but rather something which permeates the entire society and is a factor in shaping it, something which may seem impossible to grasp or define (for it is in the nature of a mere principle), but which is expressed by the entire society as an important feature of its life.

The fact that human beings have created, and daily create, this self-directed system through which they divest themselves of their innermost identity is not therefore the

result of some incomprehensible misunderstanding of history, nor is it history somehow gone off its rails. Neither is it the product of some diabolical higher will which has decided, for reasons unknown, to torment a portion of humanity in this way. It can happen and did happen only because there is obviously in modern humanity a certain tendency toward the creation, or at least the toleration, of such a system. There is obviously something in human beings which responds to this system, something they reflect and accommodate, something within them which paralyzes every effort of their better selves to revolt. Human beings are compelled to live within a lie, but they can be compelled to do so only because they are in fact capable of living in this way. Therefore not only does the system alienate humanity, but at the same time alienated humanity supports this system as its own involuntary master plan, as a degenerate image of its own degeneration, as a record of people's own failure as individuals.

The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person. In everyone there is some longing for humanity's rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence. Yet, at the same time, each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to terms with living within the lie. Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his inherent humanity, and to utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo life. This is much more than a simple conflict between two identities. It is something far worse: it is a challenge to the very notion of identity itself.

In highly simplified terms, it could be said that the post-totalitarian system has been built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society. Is it not true that the far-reaching adaptability to living a lie and the effortless spread of social auto-totality have some connection with the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity? With their willingness to surrender higher values when faced with the trivializing temptations of modern civilization? With their vulnerability to the attractions of mass indifference? And in the end, is not the grayness and the emptiness of life in the post-totalitarian system only an inflated caricature of modern life in general? And do we not in fact stand (although in the external measures of civilization, we are far behind) as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to its own latent tendencies?

VII

Let us now imagine that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogans merely to ingratiate himself. He stops voting in elections he knows are a farce. He begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings. And he even finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support. In this revolt the greengrocer steps out of living within the lie. He rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. He discovers once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom a concrete significance. His revolt is an attempt to live within the truth.

The bill is not long in coming. He will be relieved of his post as manager of the shop and transferred to the warehouse. His pay will be reduced. His hopes for a holiday in Bulgaria will evaporate. His children's access to higher education will be threatened. His superiors will harass him and his fellow workers will wonder about him. Most of those who apply these sanctions, however, will not do so from any authentic inner conviction but simply under pressure from conditions, the same conditions that once pressured the greengrocer to display the official slogans. They will persecute the greengrocer either because it is expected of them, or to demonstrate their loyalty, or simply as part of the general panorama, to which belongs an awareness that this is how situations of this sort are dealt with, that this, in fact, is how things are always done, particularly if one is not to become suspect oneself. The executors, therefore, behave essentially like everyone else, to a greater or lesser degree: as components of the post-totalitarian system, as agents of its automatism, as petty instruments of the social auto-totality.

Thus the power structure, through the agency of those who carry out the sanctions, those anonymous components of the system, will spew the greengrocer from its mouth. The system, through its alienating presence in people, will punish him for his rebellion. It must do so because the logic of its automatism and self-defense dictate it. The greengrocer has not committed a simple, individual offense, isolated in its own uniqueness, but something incomparably more serious. By breaking the rules of the game, he has disrupted the game as such. He has exposed it as a mere game. He has shattered the world of appearances, the fundamental pillar of the system. He has upset the power structure by tearing apart what holds it together. He has demonstrated that living a lie is living a lie. He has broken through the exalted facade of the system and exposed the real, base foundations of power. He has said that the emperor is naked. And because the emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous has happened: by his action, the greengrocer has addressed the world. He has enabled everyone to peer behind the curtain. He has shown everyone that it is possible to live within the truth. Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. The principle must embrace and permeate everything. There are no terms whatsoever on which it can co-exist with living within the truth, and therefore everyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety.

This is understandable: as long as appearance is not confronted with reality, it does not seem to be appearance. As long as living a lie is not confronted with living the truth, the perspective needed to expose its mendacity is lacking. As soon as the alternative appears, however, it threatens the very existence of appearance and living a lie in terms of what they are, both their essence and their all-inclusiveness. And at the same time, it is utterly unimportant how large a space this alternative occupies: its power does not consist in its physical attributes but in the light it casts on those pillars of the system and on its unstable foundations. After all, the greengrocer was a threat to the system not because of any physical or actual power he had, but because his action went beyond itself, because it illuminated its surroundings and, of course, because of the incalculable consequences of that illumination. In the post-totalitarian system, therefore, living within the truth has more than a mere existential dimension (returning humanity to its inherent nature), or a noetic dimension (revealing reality as it is), or a moral dimension (setting an example for

others). It also has an unambiguous political dimension. If the main pillar of the system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth. This is why it must be suppressed more severely than anything else.

In the post-totalitarian system, truth in the widest sense of the word has a very special import, one unknown in other contexts. In this system, truth plays a far greater (and, above all, a far different) role as a factor of power, or as an outright political force. How does the power of truth operate? How does truth as a factor of power work? How can its power-as power-be realized?

...

X

Undeniably, the most important political event in Czechoslovakia after the advent of the Husák leadership in 1968 was the appearance of Charter 77. The spiritual and intellectual climate surrounding its appearance, however, was not the product of any immediate political event. That climate was created by the trial of some young musicians associated with a rock group called "The Plastic People of the Universe." Their trial was not a confrontation of two differing political forces or conceptions, but two differing conceptions of life. On the one hand, there was the sterile puritanism of the post-totalitarian establishment and, on the other hand, unknown young people who wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth, to play the music they enjoyed, to sing songs that were relevant to their lives, and to live freely in dignity and partnership. These people had no past history of political activity. They were not highly motivated members of the opposition with political ambitions, nor were they former politicians expelled from the power structures. They had been given every opportunity to adapt to the status quo, to accept the principles of living within a lie and thus to enjoy life undisturbed by the authorities. Yet they decided on a different course. Despite this, or perhaps precisely because of it, their case had a very special impact on everyone who had not yet given up hope. Moreover, when the trial took place, a new mood had begun to surface after the years of waiting, of apathy and of skepticism toward various forms of resistance. People were "tired of being tired"; they were fed up with the stagnation, the inactivity, barely hanging on in the hope that things might improve after all. In some ways the trial was the final straw. Many groups of differing tendencies which until then had remained isolated from each other, reluctant to cooperate, or which were committed to forms of action that made cooperation difficult, were suddenly struck with the powerful realization that freedom is indivisible. Everyone understood that an attack on the Czech musical underground was an attack on a most elementary and important thing, something that in fact bound everyone together: it was an attack on the very notion of living within the truth, on the real aims of life. The freedom to play rock music was understood as a human freedom and thus as essentially the same as the freedom to engage in philosophical and political reflection, the freedom to write, the freedom to express and defend the various social and political interests of society. People were inspired to feel a genuine sense of solidarity with the young musicians and they came to realize that not standing up for the freedom of others, regardless of how remote their means of creativity or their attitude to life, meant surrendering one's own freedom. (There is no freedom without equality before

the law, and there is no equality before the law without freedom; Charter 77 has given this ancient notion a new and characteristic dimension, which has immensely important implications for modern Czech history. What Sládeček, the author of the book *Sixty-eight*, in a brilliant analysis, calls the "principle of exclusion," lies at the root of all our present-day moral and political misery. This principle was born at the end of the Second World War in that strange collusion of democrats and communists and was subsequently developed further and further, right to the bitter end. For the first time in decades this principle has been overcome, by Charter 77: all those united in the Charter have, for the first time, become equal partners. Charter 77 is not merely a coalition of communists and noncommunists—that would be nothing historically new and, from the moral and political point of view, nothing revolutionary—but it is a community that is a priori open to anyone, and no one in it is a priori assigned an inferior position.) This was the climate, then, in which Charter 77 was created. Who could have foreseen that the prosecution of one or two obscure rock groups would have such far-reaching consequences?

I think that the origins of Charter 77 illustrate very well what I have already suggested above: that in the post-totalitarian system, the real background to the movements that gradually assume political significance does not usually consist of overtly political events or confrontations between different forces or concepts that are openly political. These movements for the most part originate elsewhere, in the far broader area of the "pre-political," where living within a lie confronts living within the truth, that is, where the demands of the post-totalitarian system conflict with the real aims of life. These real aims can naturally assume a great many forms. Sometimes they appear as the basic material or social interests of a group or an individual; at other times, they may appear as certain intellectual and spiritual interests; at still other times, they may be the most fundamental of existential demands, such as the simple longing of people to live their own lives in dignity. Such a conflict acquires a political character, then, not because of the elementary political nature of the aims demanding to be heard but simply because, given the complex system of manipulation on which the post-totalitarian system is founded and on which it is also dependent, every free human act or expression, every attempt to live within the truth, must necessarily appear as a threat to the system and, thus, as something which is political par excellence. Any eventual political articulation of the movements that grow out of this "pre-political" hinterland is secondary. It develops and matures as a result of a subsequent confrontation with the system, and not because it started off as a political program, project, or impulse.

Once again, the events of 1968 confirm this. The communist politicians who were trying to reform the system came forward with their program not because they had suddenly experienced a mystical enlightenment, but because they were led to do so by continued and increasing pressure from areas of life that had nothing to do with politics in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, they were trying in political ways to solve the social conflicts (which in fact were confrontations between the aims of the system and the aims of life) that almost every level of society had been experiencing daily, and had been thinking about with increasing openness for years. Backed by this living resonance throughout society, scholars and artists had defined the problem in a wide variety of ways and students were demanding solutions.

The genesis of Charter 77 also illustrates the special political significance of the moral aspect of things that I have mentioned. Charter 77 would have been unimaginable without that powerful sense of solidarity among widely differing groups, and without the sudden realization that it was impossible to go on waiting any longer, and that the truth had to be spoken loudly and collectively, regardless of the virtual certainty of sanctions and the uncertainty of any tangible results in the immediate future. "There are some things worth suffering for," Jan Patočka wrote shortly before his death. I think that Chartists understand this not only as Patočka's legacy, but also as the best explanation of why they do what they do.

Seen from the outside, and chiefly from the vantage point of the system and its power structure, Charter 77 came as a surprise, as a bolt out of the blue. It was not a bolt out of the blue, of course, but that impression is understandable, since the ferment that led to it took place in the "hidden sphere," in that semidarkness where things are difficult to chart or analyze. The chances of predicting the appearance of the Charter were just as slight as the chances are now of predicting where it will lead. Once again, it was that shock, so typical of moments when something from the hidden sphere suddenly bursts through the moribund surface of living within a lie. The more one is trapped in the world of appearances, the more surprising it is when something like that happens.

...

XIV

In 1974, when I was employed in a brewery, my immediate superior was a certain Š, a person well versed in the art of making beer. He was proud of his profession and he wanted our brewery to brew good beer. He spent almost all his time at work, continually thinking up improvements, and he frequently made the rest of us feel uncomfortable because he assumed that we loved brewing as much as he did. In the midst of the slovenly indifference to work that socialism encourages, a more constructive worker would be difficult to imagine.

The brewery itself was managed by people who understood their work less and were less fond of it, but who were politically more influential. They were bringing the brewery to ruin and not only did they fail to react to any of Š's suggestions, but they actually became increasingly hostile toward him and tried in every way to thwart his efforts to do a good job. Eventually the situation became so bad that S felt compelled to write a lengthy letter to the manager's superior, in which he attempted to analyze the brewery's difficulties. He explained why it was the worst in the district and pointed to those responsible.

His voice might have been heard. The manager, who was politically powerful but otherwise ignorant of beer, a man who loathed workers and was given to intrigue, might have been replaced and conditions in the brewery might have been improved on the basis of Š's suggestions. Had this happened, it would have been a perfect example of small-scale work in action. Unfortunately, the precise opposite occurred: the manager of the brewery, who was a member of the Communist Party's district committee, had friends in higher places and he saw to it that the situation was resolved in his favor. Š's analysis was

described as a "defamatory document" and S himself was labeled a "political saboteur." He was thrown out of the brewery and shifted to another one where he was given a job requiring no skill. Here the notion of small-scale work had come up against the wall of the post-totalitarian system. By speaking the truth, Š had stepped out of line, broken the rules, cast himself out, and he ended up as a sub-citizen, stigmatized as an enemy. He could now say anything he wanted, but he could never, as a matter of principle, expect to be heard. He had become the "dissident" of the Eastern Bohemian Brewery.

I think this is a model case which, from another point of view, illustrates what I have already said in the preceding section: you do not become a "dissident" just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances. You are cast out of the existing structures and placed in a position of conflict with them. It begins as an attempt to do your work well, and ends with being branded an enemy of society. This is why our situation is not comparable to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when the Czech nation, in the worst period of Bach's absolutism, had only one real "dissident," Karel Havlíček, who was imprisoned in Brixen. Today, if we are not to be snobbish about it, we must admit that "dissidents" can be found on every street corner.

To rebuke "dissidents" for having abandoned "small-scale work" is simply absurd. "Dissent" is not an alternative to Masaryk's notion, it is frequently its one possible outcome. I say "frequently" in order to emphasize that this is not always the case. I am far from believing that the only decent and responsible people are those who find themselves at odds with the existing social and political structures. After all, the brewmaster Š might have won his battle. To condemn those who have kept their positions simply because they have kept them, in other words, for not being "dissidents," would be just as absurd as to hold them up as an example to the "dissidents." In any case, it contradicts the whole "dissident" attitude seen as an attempt to live within the truth-if one judges human behavior not according to what it is and whether it is good or not, but according to the personal circumstances such an attempt has brought one to.

XV

Our greengrocer's attempt to live within the truth may be confined to not doing certain things. He decides not to put flags in his window when his only motive for putting them there in the first place would have been to avoid being reported by the house warden; he does not vote in elections that he considers false; he does not hide his opinions from his superiors. In other words, he may go no further than "merely" refusing to comply with certain demands made on him by the system (which of course is not an insignificant step to take). This may, however, grow into something more. The greengrocer may begin to do something concrete, something that goes beyond an immediately personal self-defensive reaction against manipulation, something that will manifest his newfound sense of higher responsibility. He may, for example, organize his fellow greengrocers to act together in defense of their interests. He may write letters to various institutions, drawing their attention to instances of disorder and injustice around him. He may seek out unofficial literature, copy it, and lend it to his friends.

If what I have called living within the truth is a basic existential (and of course potentially political) starting point for all those "independent citizens' initiatives" and "dissident" or "opposition" movements this does not mean that every attempt to live within the truth automatically belongs in this category. On the contrary, in its most original and broadest sense, living within the truth covers a vast territory whose outer limits are vague and difficult to map, a territory full of modest expressions of human volition, the vast majority of which will remain anonymous and whose political impact will probably never be felt or described any more concretely than simply as a part of a social climate or mood. Most of these expressions remain elementary revolts against manipulation: you simply straighten your backbone and live in greater dignity as an individual.

Here and there—thanks to the nature, the assumptions, and the professions of some people, but also thanks to a number of accidental circumstances such as the specific nature of the local milieu, friends, and so on—a more coherent and visible initiative may emerge from this wide and anonymous hinterland, an initiative that transcends "merely" individual revolt and is transformed into more conscious, structured, and purposeful work. The point where living within the truth ceases to be a mere negation of living with a lie and becomes articulate in a particular way is the point at which something is born that might be called the "independent spiritual, social, and political life of society." This independent life is not separated from the rest of life ("dependent life") by some sharply defined line. Both types frequently co-exist in the same people. Nevertheless, its most important focus is marked by a relatively high degree of inner emancipation. It sails upon the vast ocean of the manipulated life like little boats, tossed by the waves but always bobbing back as visible messengers of living within the truth, articulating the suppressed aims of life.

What is this independent life of society? The spectrum of its expressions and activities is naturally very wide. It includes everything from self education and thinking about the world, through free creative activity and its communication to others, to the most varied free, civic attitudes, including instances of independent social self-organization. In short, it is an area in which living within the truth becomes articulate and materializes in a visible way.

Thus what will later be referred to as "citizens' initiatives," "dissident movements," or even "oppositions," emerge, like the proverbial one tenth of the iceberg visible above the water, from that area, from the independent life of society. In other words, just as the independent life of society develops out of living within the truth in the widest sense of the word, as the distinct, articulated expression of that life, so "dissent" gradually emerges from the independent life of society. Yet there is a marked difference: if the independent life of society, externally at least, can be understood as a higher form of living within the truth, it is far less certain that "dissident" movements are necessarily a higher form of the independent life of society. They are simply one manifestation of it and, though they may be the most visible and, at first glance, the most political (and most clearly articulated) expression of it, they are far from necessarily being the most mature or even the most important, not only in the general social sense but even in terms of direct political influence. After all, "dissent" has been artificially removed from its place of birth by having been given a special name. In fact, however, it is not possible to think

of it separated from the whole background out of which it develops, of which it is an integral part, and from which it draws all its vital strength. In any case, it follows from what has already been said about the peculiarities of the post-totalitarian system that what appears to be the most political of forces in a given moment, and what thinks of itself in such terms, need not necessarily in fact be such a force. The extent to which it is a real political force is due exclusively to its pre-political context.

What follows from this description? Nothing more and nothing less than this: it is impossible to talk about what in fact "dissidents" do and the effect of their work without first talking about the work of all those who, in one way or another, take part in the independent life of society and who are not necessarily "dissidents" at all. They may be writers who write as they wish without regard for censorship or official demands and who issue their work-when official publishers refuse to print it-as samizdat. They may be philosophers, historians, sociologists, and all those who practice independent scholarship and, if it is impossible through official or semi-official channels, who also circulate their work in samizdat or who organize private discussions, lectures, and seminars. They may be teachers who privately teach young people things that are kept from them in the state schools; clergymen who either in office or, if they are deprived of their charges, outside it, try to carry on a free religious life; painters, musicians, and singers who practice their work regardless of how it is looked upon by official institutions; everyone who shares this independent culture and helps to spread it; people who, using the means available to them, try to express and defend the actual social interests of workers, to put real meaning back into trade unions or to form independent ones; people who are not afraid to call the attention of officials to cases of injustice and who strive to see that the laws are observed; and the different groups of young people who try to extricate themselves from manipulation and live in their own way, in the spirit of their own hierarchy of values. The list could go on.

Very few would think of calling all these people "dissidents." And yet are not the well-known "dissidents" simply people like them? Are not all these activities in fact what "dissidents" do as well? Do they not produce scholarly work and publish it in samizdat? Do they not write plays and novels and poems? Do they not lecture to students in private "universities"? Do they not struggle against various forms of injustice and attempt to ascertain and express the genuine social interests of various sectors of the population?

After having tried to indicate the sources, the inner structure, and some aspects of the "dissident" attitude as such, I have clearly shifted my viewpoint from outside, as it were, to an investigation of what these "dissidents" actually do, how their initiatives are manifested, and where they lead.

The first conclusion to be drawn, then, is that the original and most important sphere of activity, one that predetermines all the others, is simply an attempt to create and support the independent life of society as an articulated expression of living within the truth. In other words, serving truth consistently, purposefully, and articulately, and organizing this service. This is only natural, after all: if living within the truth is an elementary starting point for every attempt made by people to oppose the alienating pressure of the system, if

it is the only meaningful basis of any independent act of political import, and if, ultimately, it is also the most intrinsic existential source of the "dissident" attitude, then it is difficult to imagine that even manifest "dissent" could have any other basis than the service of truth, the truthful life, and the attempt to make room for the genuine aims of life.

...

XVII

In the "dissident" movements of the Soviet bloc, the defense of human beings usually takes the form of a defense of human and civil rights as they are entrenched in various official documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the Concluding Act of the Helsinki Agreement, and the constitutions of individual states. These movements set out to defend anyone who is being prosecuted for acting in the spirit of those rights, and they in turn act in the same spirit in their work, by insisting over and over again that the regime recognize and respect human and civil rights, and by drawing attention to the areas of life where this is not the case.

Their work, therefore, is based on the principle of legality: they operate publicly and openly, insisting not only that their activity is in line with the law, but that achieving respect for the law is one of their main aims. This principle of legality, which provides both the point of departure and the framework for their activities, is common to all "dissident" groups in the Soviet bloc, even though individual groups have never worked out any formal agreement on that point. This circumstance raises an important question: Why, in conditions where a widespread and arbitrary abuse of power is the rule, is there such a general and spontaneous acceptance of the principle of legality?

On the primary level, this stress on legality is a natural expression of specific conditions that exist in the post-totalitarian system, and the consequence of an elementary understanding of that specificity. If there are in essence only two ways to struggle for a free society—that is, through legal means and through (armed or unarmed) revolt—then it should be obvious at once how inappropriate the latter alternative is in the post-totalitarian system. Revolt is appropriate when conditions are clearly and openly in motion, during a war, for example, or in situations where social or political conflicts are coming to a head. It is appropriate in a classical dictatorship that is either just setting itself up or is in a state of collapse. In other words, it is appropriate where social forces of comparable strength (for example, a government of occupation versus a nation fighting for its freedom) are confronting each other on the level of actual power, or where there is a clear distinction between the usurpers of power and the subjugated population, or when society finds itself in a state of open crisis. Conditions in the post-totalitarian system—except in extremely explosive situations like the one in Hungary in 1956—are, of course, precisely the opposite. They are static and stable, and social crises, for the most part, exist only latently (though they run much deeper). Society is not sharply polarized on the level of actual political power, but, as we have seen, the fundamental lines of conflict run right through each person. In this situation, no attempt at revolt could ever hope to set up even

a minimum of resonance in the rest of society, because that society is soporific, submerged in a consumer rat race and wholly involved in the post-totalitarian system (that is, participating in it and acting as agents of its automatism), and it would simply find anything like revolt unacceptable. It would interpret the revolt as an attack upon itself and, rather than supporting the revolt, it would very probably react by intensifying its bias toward the system, since, in its view, the system can at least guarantee a certain quasi-legality. Add to this the fact that the post-totalitarian system has at its disposal a complex mechanism of direct and indirect surveillance that has no equal in history and it is clear that not only would any attempt to revolt come to a dead end politically, but it would also be almost technically impossible to carry off. Most probably it would be liquidated before it had a chance to translate its intentions into action. Even if revolt were possible, however, it would remain the solitary gesture of a few isolated individuals and they would be opposed not only by a gigantic apparatus of national (and supranational) power, but also by the very society in whose name they were mounting their revolt in the first place. (This, by the way, is another reason why the regime and its propaganda have been ascribing terroristic aims to the "dissident" movements and accusing them of illegal and conspiratorial methods.)

All of this, however, is not the main reason why the "dissident" movements support the principle of legality. That reason lies deeper, in the innermost structure of the "dissident" attitude. This attitude is and must be fundamentally hostile toward the notion of violent change—simply because it places its faith in violence.

Of course, one need not be an advocate of violent revolution to ask whether an appeal to legality makes any sense at all when the laws—and particularly the general laws concerning human rights—are no more than a facade, an aspect of the world of appearances, a mere game behind which lies total manipulation. "They can ratify anything because they will still go ahead and do whatever they want anyway"—this is an opinion we often encounter. Is it not true that constantly to take them at their word, to appeal to laws every child knows are binding only as long as the government wishes, is in the end just a kind of hypocrisy, a Švejkian obstructionism and, finally, just another way of playing the game, another form of self-delusion? In other words, is the legalistic approach at all compatible with the principle of living within the truth?

This question can only be answered by first looking at the wider implications of how the legal code functions in the post-totalitarian system.

In a classical dictatorship, to a far greater extent than in the post-totalitarian system, the will of the ruler is carried out directly, in an unregulated fashion. A dictatorship has no reason to hide its foundations, nor to conceal the real workings of power, and therefore it need not encumber itself to any great extent with a legal code. The post-totalitarian system, on the other hand, is utterly obsessed with the need to bind everything in a single order: life in such a state is thoroughly permeated by a dense network of regulations, proclamations, directives, norms, orders, and rules. (It is not called a bureaucratic system without good reason.) A large proportion of those norms function as direct instruments of the complex manipulation of life that is intrinsic to the post-totalitarian system.

Individuals are reduced to little more than tiny cogs in an enormous mechanism and their

significance is limited to their function in this mechanism. Their job, housing accommodation, movements, social and cultural expressions, everything, in short, must be cosseted together as firmly as possible, predetermined, regulated, and controlled. Every aberration from the prescribed course of life is treated as error, license, and anarchy. From the cook in the restaurant who, without hard-to-get permission from the bureaucratic apparatus, cannot cook something special for his customers, to the singer who cannot perform his new song at a concert without bureaucratic approval, everyone, in all aspects of their life, is caught in this regulatory tangle of red tape, the inevitable product of the post-totalitarian system. With ever-increasing consistency, it binds all the expressions and aims of life to the spirit of its own aims: the vested interests of its own smooth, automatic operation.

In a narrower sense the legal code serves the post-totalitarian system in this direct way as well, that is, it too forms a part of the world of regulations and prohibitions. At the same time, however, it performs the same service in another indirect way, one that brings it remarkably closer—depending on which level of the law is involved—to ideology and in some cases makes it a direct component of that ideology.

1. Like ideology, the legal code functions as an excuse. It wraps the base exercise of power in the noble apparel of the letter of the law; it creates the pleasing illusion that justice is done, society protected, and the exercise of power objectively regulated. All this is done to conceal the real essence of post-totalitarian legal practice: the total manipulation of society. If an outside observer who knew nothing at all about life in Czechoslovakia were to study only its laws, he would be utterly incapable of understanding what we were complaining about. The hidden political manipulation of the courts and of public prosecutors, the limitations placed on lawyers' ability to defend their clients, the closed nature, *de facto*, of trials, the arbitrary actions of the security forces, their position of authority over the judiciary, the absurdly broad application of several deliberately vague sections of that code, and of course the state's utter disregard for the positive sections of that code (the rights of citizens): all of this would remain hidden from our outside observer. The only thing he would take away would be the impression that our legal code is not much worse than the legal code of other civilized countries, and not much different either, except perhaps for certain curiosities, such as the entrenchment in the constitution of a single political party's eternal rule and the state's love for a neighboring superpower.

But that is not all: if our observer had the opportunity to study the formal side of the policing and judicial procedures and practices, how they look "on paper," he would discover that for the most part the common rules of criminal procedure are observed: charges are laid within the prescribed period following arrest, and it is the same with detention orders. Indictments are properly delivered, the accused has a lawyer, and so on. In other words, everyone has an excuse: they have all observed the law. In reality, however, they have cruelly and pointlessly ruined a young person's life, perhaps for no other reason than because he made samizdat copies of a novel written by a banned writer, or because the police deliberately falsified their testimony (as everyone knows, from the judge on down to the defendant). Yet all of this somehow remains in the background. The

falsified testimony is not necessarily obvious from the trial documents and the section of the Criminal Code dealing with incitement does not formally exclude the application of that charge to the copying of a banned novel. In other words, the legal code-at least in several areas-is no more than a facade, an aspect of the world of appearances. Then why is it there at all? For exactly the same reason as ideology is there: it provides a bridge of excuses between the system and individuals, making it easier for them to enter the power structure and serve the arbitrary demands of power. The excuse lets individuals fool themselves into thinking they are merely upholding the law and protecting society from criminals. (Without this excuse, how much more difficult it would be to recruit new generations of judges, prosecutors, and interrogators!) As an aspect of the world of appearances, however, the legal code deceives not only the conscience of prosecutors, it deceives the public, it deceives foreign observers, and it even deceives history itself.

2. Like ideology, the legal code is an essential instrument of ritual communication outside the power structure. It is the legal code that gives the exercise of power a form, a framework, a set of rules. It is the legal code that enables all components of the system to communicate, to put themselves in a good light, to establish their own legitimacy. It provides their whole game with its rules and engineers with their technology. Can the exercise of post-totalitarian power be imagined at all without this universal ritual making it all possible, serving as a common language to bind the relevant sectors of the power structure together? The more important the position occupied by the repressive apparatus in the power structure, the more important that it function according to some kind of formal code. How, otherwise, could people be so easily and inconspicuously locked up for copying banned books if there were no judges, prosecutors, interrogators, defense lawyers, court stenographers, and thick files, and if all this were not held together by some firm order? And above all, without that innocent-looking Section 10 on incitement? This could all be done, of course, without a legal code and its accessories, but only in some ephemeral dictatorship run by a Ugandan bandit, not in a system that embraces such a huge portion of civilized humankind and represents an integral, stable, and respected part of the modern world. That would not only be unthinkable, it would quite simply be technically impossible. Without the legal code functioning as a ritually cohesive force, the post-totalitarian system could not exist.

...

XX

There is no real evidence that Western democracy, that is, democracy of the traditional parliamentary type, can offer solutions that are any more profound. It may even be said that the more room there is in the Western democracies (compared to our world) for the genuine aims of life, the better the crisis is hidden from people and the more deeply do they become immersed in it.

It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and the industrial-consumer society, for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it. People are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in the post-

totalitarian societies. But this static complex of rigid, conceptually sloppy, and politically pragmatic mass political parties run by professional apparatuses and releasing the citizen from all forms of concrete and personal responsibility; and those complex focuses of capital accumulation engaged in secret manipulations and expansion; the omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture, and all that flood of information: all of it, so often analyzed and described, can only with great difficulty be imagined as the source of humanity's rediscovery of itself. In his June 1978 Harvard lecture, Solzhenitsyn describes the illusory nature of freedoms not based on personal responsibility and the chronic inability of the traditional democracies, as a result, to oppose violence and totalitarianism. In a democracy, human beings may enjoy many personal freedoms and securities that are unknown to us, but in the end they do them no good, for they too are ultimately victims of the same automatism, and are incapable of defending their concerns about their own identity or preventing their superficialization or transcending concerns about their own personal survival to become proud and responsible members of the polis, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny.

Because all our prospects for a significant change for the better are very long range indeed, we are obliged to take note of this deep crisis of traditional democracy. Certainly, if conditions were to be created for democracy in some countries in the Soviet bloc (although this is becoming increasingly improbable), it might be an appropriate transitional solution that would help to restore the devastated series of civic awareness, to renew democratic discussion, to allow for the crystallization of an elementary political plurality, an essential expression of the aims of life. But to cling to the notion of traditional parliamentary democracy as one's political ideal and to succumb to the illusion that only this tried and true form is capable of guaranteeing human beings enduring dignity and an independent role in society would, in my opinion, be at the very least shortsighted.

I see a renewed focus of politics on real people as something far more profound than merely returning to the everyday mechanisms of Western (or, if you like, bourgeois) democracy. In 1968, I felt that our problem could be solved by forming an opposition party that would compete publicly for power with the Communist Party. I have long since come to realize, however, that it is just not that simple and that no opposition party in and of itself, just as no new electoral laws in and of themselves, could make society proof against some new form of violence. No "dry" organizational measures in themselves can provide that guarantee, and we would be hard pressed to find in them that God who alone can save us.

...