

# “THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS”

## PART 2

In the first part of this article, Robin Hallett suggested that with the forces of counter-revolution at present dominant in South Africa, liberals here might gain from accounts of the experiences of others living under profoundly oppressive regimes. He referred to a collection of essays – **The Power of the Powerless** – by a group of Czech dissidents (called “Chartists” after their 1977 manifesto **Charter 77**) recently published in an English translation; and proceeded to give a summary of the title-essay of this collection (written by Vaclav Havel), adding comments about its relevance to South African conditions. The summary continues as follows.

Talk about ‘changing’ or ‘reforming’ the system is really no more than grappling with a ‘pseudo-problem’, ‘We know from a number of harsh experiences that neither reform or change is in itself a guarantee of anything. (p. 53). ‘A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed.’ (p. 52) ‘Our concern is whether we can live with dignity in such a system, whether it serves people rather than people serving it.’ (p. 53). (Again how relevant Havel’s words are to all those who talk about ‘reform’ or ‘dismantling apartheid’.)

Havel then turns to consider the special meaning of the terms ‘opposition’ and ‘dissidence’ within the post-totalitarian system. Clearly ‘opposition’ has a connotation entirely different from that applied to the word in democratic society, where it implies the legitimacy of alternative contestants for power. ‘For many decades the powerful ruling society in the Soviet bloc has used the label ‘opposition’ as the blackest of indictments, as synonymous with the term ‘enemy’. ‘When such a label can lead ‘straight to the gallows’ people are clearly unwilling to apply it to themselves. (So the signatories of Charter 77 made a special point of stressing that they were not an opposition.) (p. 56).

But those who reject the term ‘opposition’ have another reason for doing so ‘For people who have decided to live within the truth . . . it is naturally disagreeable to feel required to define their own original and positive ‘position’ negatively. . . to think of themselves primarily as people who are against something, not simply as people who are what they are.’ (p. 56) (This point is equally relevant to the term and concept of ‘anti-apartheid’.)

‘Dissident’ is a label which was first applied by western journalists to certain people in Soviet bloc countries whose writings, published underground, indicated their disagreement with the existing system. But to think of ‘dissidents’ as a special category of persons is misleading. ‘Dissidents’ are essentially ‘ordinary people with ordinary cares, differing from the rest only in that they say

aloud what the rest cannot say or are afraid to say’. ‘Dissident’ is ‘primarily an existential attitude’, growing out of ‘the everyday human world, the world of daily tension between the aims of life and the aims of the system’. It is this very ordinariness that frightens the authorities and leads them to denounce ‘dissidents’ in the blackest of terms, as subversives trying to overthrow the whole system. (In the same way in South Africa it is impossible for the authorities to acknowledge that dissidence springs from genuine grievances: it must always be linked to the malign influence of external ‘agitators’.)

Caught up within the system, what are ordinary people to do? One possible line of approach Havel finds by recalling the concept of ‘small scale work’ put forward by Thomas Masaryk who was to become the father of the Czechoslovak nation, at a time when Czechs and Slovaks were living under Habsburg rule. Masaryk had in mind ‘honest and responsible work in widely differing areas of life but within the existing social order’, work that would ‘stimulate national creativity and national self-confidence’. He placed special emphasis on ‘upbringing and education’. ‘Transforming the nature of the nation began with the transformation of human beings’. (p. 61)

This notion of the importance of small scale work is still alive in Czechoslovakia today. Things would be far worse but for the contribution of many hard-working people trying to do the best they can. ‘These people assume correctly that every piece of good work is an indirect criticism of bad politics’. (p. 61) But there are clear limitations to the effectiveness of this approach. Here Havel is able to provide a vivid example from his own experience. In 1974 when Havel was working at a brewery, his immediate superior, a certain S, was a man absolutely devoted to the art of brewing. The brewery’s management was made up of political appointees whose ignorance of their job was bringing the brewery to ruin. Finally S, exasperated at having all his suggestions for improvement brushed aside, wrote a long memorandum and sent it to a higher office in the hierarchy above the local management. But the management had friends in the right places. S was described as a ‘political saboteur’, moved to another brewery and given a very inferior position. Thus are ‘dissidents’ created. All too often those who attempt to follow the notion of ‘small-scale works’, who genuinely try to live within the truth, find that this path inevitably leads to ‘dissent’, (pp. 62-63). (So contemporary South Africa provides many instances of those who, trying to work within the system, to introduce change from within, have found themselves falling foul of the authorities and been faced with the alternatives of dismissal, resignation or a careful show of conformity.)

Most attempts to ‘live within the truth’ are known only to the individual him- or herself. They represent ‘an elementary revolt against manipulation’. But when ‘living

within the truth becomes articulate in a particular way' – when these self-emancipated individuals begin to communicate with others who have gone through the same process – then 'something is born which may be called "the independent, spiritual, social and political life of society".' This life 'includes everything from self-education and thinking about the world, through free creative activity and its communication to others, to the most varied civic attitudes, including instances of independent self-organization'. This last manifestation may later come to be described as 'dissident movements'. Prominent 'dissidents' attract publicity, but they represent no more than the tip of the iceberg. They cannot be separated from all those who help to maintain the 'independent life of society' and who may not necessarily think of themselves as 'dissidents'. Their number includes 'teachers who privately teach young people things that are kept from them in the state schools; clergymen who try to carry on a free religious life; painters, musicians and singers who practice their work regardless of how it is looked on by official institutions; everyone who shares this independent culture and helps to spread it; people . . . who try to express and defend the actual social interests of workers, to put real meaning back into trade unions or form independent ones; people who are not afraid to call the attention of officials to cases of injustice . . . and the different groups of young people who try to extricate themselves from manipulation and live in their own way . . . The list could go on.' (p. 66)

To many observers 'dissident movements' seem to suffer from one essential disadvantage. They are of necessity always on the defensive, they are not in a position to frame 'positive' political programmes. But to Havel this apparent weakness is in reality 'their greatest strength'. 'Politics has been forced to return to its only proper starting point, individual people.' 'The central concern of political thought is no longer abstract visions of a self-redeeming, 'positive' model . . . 'but rather the people who have so far merely been enslaved by those models and their practices.' (p. 68)

Dissident movements in the Soviet bloc lay especial stress on the principle of legality, openly urging the regime to respect human and civil rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in its own constitution. There are two reasons for this stress on legality. One derives from a realistic appraisal of the nature of the post-totalitarian state. 'There are in essence only two ways to 'struggle for a free society': through legal means and through revolt. Revolt may be appropriate in certain circumstances: against an army of occupation during a war, for example, or against a classical dictatorship in a state of collapse. In the post-totalitarian system, on the other hand, society is 'soporific', 'submerged in a consumer rat-race'. Many individuals are caught up within the system itself and would find anything like revolt unacceptable. Add to this the powers of control and surveillance at the system's disposal and it is evident that any revolt 'would be almost technically impossible to carry off'. (p. 70)

The second reason for supporting legality lies 'deeper in the innermost structure of the 'dissident' attitude'. This attitude derives from a fundamental hostility to the notion of violence. (Violence can be accepted 'only as a necessary evil in extreme circumstances, when direct violence can only be met by violence and where remaining passive would in effect be supporting violence'.) Dissidents have a

'profound belief that a future secured by violence might actually be worse than what exists now'. They turn away from 'abstract political visions of the future towards concrete human beings and ways of defending them effectively in the here and now'. They reject the idea of the violent political overthrow of the system not because it is too radical but 'on the contrary because it does not seem radical enough'. (p. 71). Many classical Marxists regard the struggle for human rights as 'hopelessly legalistic, illusory, opportunistic and ultimately misleading' because of its notion that there can be some form of negotiation with the exploiters on the basis of a false legality. Obsessed with the notion of class struggle, they think of the future in terms of revolution. But not being able to find anyone determined enough to carry through their revolution, they end up 'bitter, sceptical, passive and ultimately apathetic'. (p. 72)

But does an appeal to legality make any sense when the laws – especially general laws guaranteeing human rights – are no more than a facade? 'Is the legalistic approach at all compatible with the principle of "living within the truth"?' To answer such a question one must look more closely at the way the legal code functions in the post-totalitarian system is 'permeated by a dense network of that prevailing in a classical dictatorship where the ruler carries out his will in an arbitrary fashion. The post-totalitarian system is 'permeated by a dense network of regulations'. 'Individuals are reduced to little more than tiny cogs in an enormous mechanism'. Their jobs, housing accommodation, movements, social and cultural expressions, everything in short . . . must be regulated and controlled. (Black South Africans will recognize this as an exact description of the apartheid state.)

In the post-totalitarian system the legal code has much the same function as ideology. It serves both as excuse and as an 'essential instrument of ritual'. An outside observer looking at the legal code or the rules for criminal procedure of a country such as Czechoslovakia would probably find nothing to cause concern. The letter of the law 'creates the pleasing illusion that justice is being done'. But such an observer would miss the reality behind the facade: 'the arbitrary actions of the security forces' or 'the absurdly broad application of several deliberately vague sections of the legal code'. Nor would the same observer have a chance of seeing how the same legal code could 'cruelly and pointlessly ruin a young person's life' simply for the offence of making copies of a banned book. And the whole paraphernalia of the law – the ritual represented by 'judges, prosecutors, interrogators, defence lawyers, court stenographers and thick files', provides the whole system with legitimacy and 'cohesive force'. (pp. 73-75.)

Some sections of the legal code refer to citizens' rights. These sections may be no more than 'words, words, words'. Yet these sections are designed to give the system legitimacy. When 'dissidents' appeal to these sections, they certainly have no illusions about the real nature of the law. But their appeals show up 'the purely ritualistic nature of the law'. 'Demanding that the laws be upheld . . . threatens the whole mendacious structure at its point of maximum mendacity'. This practice of making constant appeals is 'another form of "small scale work"'. And it fits in with the 'dissident' attitude that places 'more



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MEZINÁRODNÍ ROK  
LIDSKÝCH PRAV

*Human Rights emblem on a postage stamp  
issued during the Prague Spring*

importance on oft-repeated and consistent concrete action – even though it may be inadequate and though it may ease only insignificantly the sufferings of a single insignificant citizen – than it does in some distant ‘fundamental solution’ in an uncertain future’. (pp. 75-77)

The decision to ‘live within the truth’ leads on to the defence of human rights. But there is a third stage in the development of ‘dissident movements’ – the creation of parallel structures, the construction of what has been called ‘the parallel polis’.

This development first became apparent with the emergence of what was termed a ‘second culture’ in the form of certain types of rock-music. But very soon the term was being applied to all forms of non-conformist intellectual and artistic activity. Before long the ‘second culture’ was establishing its own forms of organization. These ranged from the **samizdat** publishing of books and journals to private seminars and theatrical performances. There was the development of a ‘parallel information service’, of ‘parallel foreign contacts’ and this in turn led to the evolution of a ‘parallel political life’. All this could be seen as ‘a non-violent attempt by people to negate the system within themselves and to establish their life on a new basis, that of their own proper identity’. But it would be quite wrong to see these parallel structures as representing some sort of ‘retreat into a ghetto’, or, as has happened with some of the devotees of an ‘alternative culture’ in the west, into an Indian **ashram**. ‘The parallel polis points beyond itself and only makes sense as an act of deepening one’s responsibility to and for the whole’. And, as the Czech philosopher Patocka used to say, ‘the most interesting thing about responsibility is that we carry it with us everywhere’. (pp. 78-81)

What effect are ‘dissident movements’ likely to have on the life of their societies? Their importance must not be overestimated. All sorts of other forces affect the process of change: international politics, economic developments, power shifts at the centre. The ‘dissidents’ do not assume a messianic role: they do not see themselves as

an elite that knows best; they have no desire to lead anyone or to ‘raise the consciousness of the “unconscious masses”’. Their influence is essentially indirect. They are not ‘confronting the regime on the level of actual power’. Their task primarily is to ‘address the hidden spheres of society’, to exert the pressure of ‘free thought’. To this pressure the system must make some response – and it has only two alternatives – repression or adaptation. Adaptation can take different forms.

The regime may decide to introduce reforms. Such reforms can never be other than ‘halfway measures’. They ‘cast a smokescreen over the situation’, making it ‘more difficult to distinguish between “admissible” and “inadmissible” compromises’. Yet it can still be said of ‘reform’ that it is always essentially good when it happens because it opens out new spaces’. (pp. 83-84)

A higher form of adaptation comes about when the system comes to accept ‘more or less institutionalized forms of plurality’ – accepting the emergence of new publishing houses or parallel research institutes, allowing smaller student unions to replace monolithic youth movements, tolerating – as happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968 – the emergence of genuinely independent bodies, such as The Club of Committed Non-Communists. The ‘ultimate phases of this process’ would see ‘official structures withering away . . . to be replaced by new structures that have developed from “below”.’ (pp. 84-85) But it is pointless to indulge in excessive speculation. There will always be ‘latent or open conflict’ between the system and those who are concerned to live within the truth. ‘Dissident movements’ have as their point of departure ‘the real, everyday struggle for a better life “here and now”, “the everyday, thankless and never ending struggle of human beings to live more freely, truthfully and in quiet dignity’. This is a struggle which ‘imposes no limits on itself’. ‘The purity of the struggle is the best guarantee of optimum results’. (pp. 88-89)

‘The absence of a normal political life . . . has one positive aspect’: ‘it compels us to examine our situation in terms of its deeper coherences and to consider our future in the context of long-range, global prospects’. Here we come face to face with what the German philosopher Heidegger has described as ‘humanity’s ineptitude’ when confronted with the ‘planetary power of technology’. ‘Only A God can save us now’, Heidegger has said. Other thinkers speak of the need for an ‘existential revolution’. Here political changes are not enough. Western democracies are just as much victims of ‘the automatism of technology’. In 1968 Havel thought that ‘our problem could be solved by forming an opposition party that would compete publicly for power with the Communist Party!’ Now he sees ‘a renewed focus of politics in real people as something far more profound than merely returning to the everyday mechanisms of western democracy’. (pp. 91-92)

Havel ends his long essay by posing to himself the direct question: what is to be done? He answers it first in terms that are of necessity abstract, theoretical, philosophical. ‘The direction in which we must go’ involves such factors as ‘a new experience of being, a renewed rootedness in the universe, a newly grasped sense of ‘higher responsibility’, a new-found inner relationship to other people and to the human community’. The political consequences of this ‘new spirit’ will be the emergence of structures that are ‘open, dynamic and small’, structures that allow for

'the rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love.' In contrast to 'the strategic agglomeration of formalized organizations' as presented by the existing state structure, it is 'better to have organizations springing up *ad hoc*, infused with enthusiasm for a particular purpose and disappearing when that purpose has been achieved', (pp. 92-93)

An abstract vision and one more suitable perhaps, Havel modestly remarks, 'private meditation', And yet he cannot get away from the thought that this 'vision' of "post-democratic" structures is vividly reminiscent of the nature of 'dissident' groups as he himself has known them. 'Do not these small communities, bound together by thousands of shared tribulations, give rise to some of these "humanly meaningful" political relationships? . . . Are not these informal, non-bureaucratic, dynamic and open communities that comprise the "parallel polis" a kind of rudimentary prefiguration, a symbolic model of those more meaningful 'post-democratic' political structures that might become the foundations of a better society?' (p. 95)

From 'thousands of personal experiences' Havel has found that the mere fact of having signed Charter 77 'evoked sudden and powerful feelings of genuine community among people who were all but strangers before'. 'It is as though the mere awareness and acceptance of a common task and a shared experience were enough to transform people and the climate of their lives'. But perhaps this is only a temporary situation – the response of people under threat: the threat and moods will change, and one must always be on one's guard against arrogance: 'it would be an expression of unforgivable pride were we to see the little we do as a fundamental solution'.

Yet as he ends his essay, pondering on the question 'What is to be done?', Havel discerns an even deeper question. Is the 'brighter future' really always so distant? 'What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?' (pp. 95-96)

What is the significance of Havel's thoughtful and stirring analysis of his own situation as a 'dissident' in a Communist state to those who are actively concerned with the defence of human rights in South Africa? Before suggesting an answer to that question, one possible objection must be removed. A good many South Africans may find it highly offensive to see their own country put in the category of that 'post-totalitarian system' of which Havel has such vivid personal experience in Czechoslovakia. Certainly white south Africans, if they were suddenly transported to Czechoslovakia, would become immediately conscious of all the freedoms they enjoy in their own country and that are denied to the citizens of most Communist states: freedom of expression, organization, employment, accommodation, movement. Black South Africans on the other hand might well find Havel's post-totalitarian system strikingly reminiscent of the network of controls to which they are subjected in their own land. They would of course also be aware of a measure of social equality in Czechoslovakia of a kind that has never existed in South Africa.

Ideology, bureaucracy and law – these are the three areas where the similarity is striking. It is easy to underestimate the importance of ideology in South Africa. Outside observers and indeed most English-speaking South Africans are rarely exposed to the full force of apartheid as an ideology. And among black South Africans and liberal-minded whites the ideology arouses such a mixture of derision and detestation that it is easy to downplay its significance. But the experience of conversation with a supporter of the system is a salutary corrective: it does not take long to discover to what extent an ideology can completely permeate a person's thinking. Indeed as with committed ideologues of any persuasion, conversation in the exact sense of the word – a reasoned interchange of ideas and experience – is impossible. In South Africa an ideology so passionately held by those occupying the commanding heights of the political structure has given government actions a consistency that would not have been possible without this essential strait-jacket. On strictly logical grounds the indignation of right-wing critics at President Botha's policy of 'reform' is absolutely logical: 'reform' looks like an abandonment of some of the basic tenets of the faith. On the other hand, as Havel points out, 'reform' in the post-totalitarian system can never involve more than 'half-way measures', yet even such limited measures can have the beneficial effect of 'opening out new spaces'. It is the emergence of these 'new spaces' that causes the hard-liners such alarm – and from their point of view with good reason.

Obviously the National Party in South Africa cannot be too closely equated with the Communist Party in Soviet Bloc countries. Given the depth of historical-tribal-cultural divisions among white South Africans it has never been possible for the Nationalists to acquire for themselves quite so monolithic a position as the Communists in Eastern Europe. But one has only to consider the way in which the Nationalists have used their power to make sure that their supporters dominate the bureaucracy, the parastatals and the security forces, to realize that one is dealing with a political organization quite unlike the political parties found in western democracies. And when one goes on to consider the ramifications of the bureaucracy on South Africa, then it does not become in the least unreasonable to see many similarities with the Communist system.

The same point may be made with regard to law. There can be no country outside the Communist bloc where the lives of the majority of the population are daily affected by such a range of regulations as South Africa. And as in Communist countries the law can be seen as serving both as excuse and ritual – but with one important proviso. The western tradition that the judiciary should remain strictly independent of the executive is still strong enough in South Africa to ensure that the government cannot always have its own way in the courts.

'Dissidents' in a country such as Czechoslovakia are confronted with an immensely powerful state apparatus. there can be no question of revolt. Is the same true of South Africa? Obviously not, at least to those inside and outside the country who favour the tactics of the armed struggle. But here what Havel and other 'dissidents' have



to say about violence is immensely relevant. Their profound abhorrence of violence derives from their conviction that 'a future secured by violence might actually be worse than that which exists now'. This is a point with which many people with direct experience of the effects of violence in South African townships may find themselves in agreement. Moreover when one considers the fearsome machinery of repression the apartheid regime now has at its disposal, despite its isolation in the international arena, then it is certainly not unreasonable to argue that revolt – the conventional precursor to revolution – does not present a possible option.

What then can we do? The answer has already been given by many South Africans, white as well as blacks, who have succeeded in recent years in creating a whole range of what Havel would describe as 'parallel structures'. These are to be found in every field of South African life. In education with NUSAS and the various black student unions, with SACHED and other similar organizations and with all those within the existing structures who have given their minds to the development of 'alternative' syllabuses. In literature and the arts, with theatre and rock groups in the townships, with The Space (In its glorious heyday in the 1970s) in Cape Town, with literary journals such as **Staffrider**. In the field of research, with such organizations as AFRA and the various offshoots of the Surplus People Project. In the Black Sash, in many Church organizations. In the South African Institute of Race Relations. In the various Detainee Support Committees and Legal Resource Centres. In the newly emerging black trade unions, and in such political organizations as the U.D.F.

For all those involved in these various organizations the element of 'living within the truth' comes from the rejection of the 'lie' of 'racial segregation', the concentration on the fate of individual human beings. Those who transcend the barriers the regime seeks to build up are indeed making – quite as much as the 'dissidents' of Eastern Europe – 'a non-violent attempt to negate the system within themselves'. they too have become aware that 'the real sphere of potential politics lies in the continuing and cruel tension between the aims of the system and the aims of life, that is, the elementary need of human beings to live in a bearable way.' they too have created 'informal, non-bureaucratic, open and dynamic communities'. They take as their point of departure 'the real, everyday struggle for a better life "here and now" 'a struggle that may focus now on rents, now on busfares or the release of detainees . . . but the list is endless.

And there are many people in these 'parallel structures' – take as one example those working in Black Sash Advice Offices – whose work shows (even though they themselves may not care to put the point so explicitly) that they place more importance on 'oft-repeated and consistent concrete action – even though it may be inadequate and though it may ease only insignificantly the sufferings of a single insignificant individual' than they do on 'some distant "fundamental solution" in an uncertain future'.

'Fundamental solutions' are of course a form of utopianism, and to free one's thinking of utopianism is to take a step nearer a proper appreciation of reality. Any grasp of South African realities must certainly involve careful thought about what Havel, following Heidegger, calls 'the automatism of technology', Think of all those processes that have led to the emergence of 'the surplus people': farm workers thrown off the land as a result of mechanization, urban workers with little chance of a job as industry becomes more capital intensive. Add to this the consequences of a birth rate which is adding close on three per cent to the African population every year. Whatever political solutions may be devised, here are factors bound to produce a daunting increase in human misery.

Consider too the consequences of ecological degradation – the washing or blowing away of top soil, the destruction of woodlands, the spread of desert conditions. These are of course issues of planetary significance. They hit many South Africans with a stark directness. Even the most equitable political solutions would not have much real meaning unless they served to set in motion processes that began significantly to reverse current trends.

Havel follows Masaryk in laying special stress on the importance of 'small-scale work'. Czechoslovakia, he says, would be far worse off but for the contribution of many hard-working people trying to do the best they can. 'These people assume correctly that every piece of good work is an indirect criticism of the system'. The same point is abundantly true in South Africa. One thinks of individual farmers who cherish their land and care for their workers, of teachers struggling valiantly to cope with over-crowded classes, inadequate equipment and unsatisfactory syllabuses; of social workers grappling every day with the realities of rural and urban poverty; of housewives really concerned about the well-being of their domestic helpers, of parents doing all they can to maintain a secure home for their children, even though 'home' is no more than a shack in a shantytown . . . again the list is endless.

The importance of Havel's thinking is that he provides a structure in which all such people have a place, a structure far more capacious than the fashionable nostrums of both capitalist and communist societies. He and other human rights activists in Eastern Europe have brought 'politics back to its proper starting point – individual people'. They have shown the creative power of 'free thought', and they have reminded us that 'liberation', that 'brighter future', may not necessarily be some far off almost inaccessible event, that in the 'humanly meaningful' political relationships established between those who come together in the parallel structures something profoundly liberatory has already been established. All these ideas have a universal relevance but they must surely have a quite special meaning for all those South Africans who see the task before them as the creation of a society that is truly just, free and democratic. □