

Philosophy and Dissidence in Cold War Europe

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Preface

Possibility beyond Shadow Lines

Jan Palach set himself on fire on January 16, 1969 to encourage the citizens of Czechoslovakia to protest the occupation of their country by the Soviet Union. He died from his wounds three days later. The BBC estimated that 500,000 attended his funeral, noting that the statue in Wenceslas Square was “daubed with a slogan ‘Do not be indifferent to the day when the light of the future was carried forward by a burning body.’”¹ His dramatic action did not create any immediate results; the Soviet forces did not yield to protesters, and the occupation continued. The Czechoslovak communist state, threatened by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev with further interference, also cracked down on demonstrations, made mass arrests, and announced that the status of the country had been “normalized.”²

Twenty years later, the commemoration of Palach’s death ended differently. When Václav Havel and several others were arrested for trying to lay flowers at the site of Palach’s immolation, Jan Urban, a Czech dissident, notes how “it was at this moment that it became too much for the people...they started to cross the shadow line. They started to enter a new era...they couldn’t go on being silent. They started to sign petitions against Havel’s trial.”³ Less than a year later, Havel was president of Czechoslovakia, and the communist party had stepped down from power. In another year, the USSR collapsed.

As an act of political protest, self-immolation is a dramatic way to cross a shadow line. Suicide is a statement about life itself and the nature of human existence as such; when it becomes politicized, it is a form of dissent that no one can ignore, because it is both visually stirring and existentially terrifying. We all have our shadow lines. No one has exactly the same line, especially when it comes to politics.

On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest his treatment by Tunisian police. He died from his wounds on January 4, 2011. The street demonstrations in response to Bouazizi's suicide turned into protests against the government of Tunisia. In response, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled Tunisia after 23 years in power. Within another month, a dozen more self-immolations occurred throughout Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.⁴ Street protests also began in Egypt against president Hosni Mubarak, a dictator of 30 years. Demonstrators destroyed house-sized posters of his face, occupied Tahrir Square, and waited for the demise of what they called their modern Pharaoh. He abdicated 18 days later, leaving the military to oversee what they promised to be a transition to elections and multiparty democracy. More demonstrations followed in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Algeria.

In 2011, the evocation of parallels to 1989 began early. As events in Tunisia unfolded, "Eastern Europe" and Northern Africa were held up in comparison.⁵ As unrest spread in Egypt, "the whole Arab world" was discussed as if it were "the whole communist world." Some hoped governments might collapse suddenly, giving way to quick democratic revolutions in authoritarian countries, as occurred in 1989. Others assumed skeptically that crackdowns were forthcoming, and like in 1969, all would be "normalized" to the former status quo. Others decided to wait and watch the owl of Minerva fly at dusk.

Jan Palach did not know the ultimate consequences of his actions. Nor did Mohamed Bouazizi. Not knowing the light of the future, however, is only human. They both knew the world they lived in. They both concluded that collective ideas, symbols, and taking a stance against immoral power were more important than their own journey through the sorrows, disappointments, and extinguished hopes of human life. Palach left behind a letter:

Because our nations are on the brink of despair we have decided to express our protest and to wake up the people of this land. Our group is composed of volunteers who are willing to burn themselves for our cause. It was my honor to draw the lot number one and thus I acquired the privilege of writing the first letter and starting the first torch. Our demands are: (1) the immediate elimination of censorship. (2) the prohibition of the distribution of *Zprávy* [the Soviet occupation journal]. If our demands are not fulfilled within 5 days and if the people do not support us sufficiently through a strike of indefinite duration more torches will burn. Remember August. In international politics a place was made for Czechoslovakia. Let us use it. [signed:] Torch Number One.⁶

The most important words in this letter are “we,” “our,” and “us.” This was not a solitary act. This was a group of students who had come together to “wake up the people of this land.”

The people, in slumber, perhaps did not even know the full extent of possible despair. Or if they did despair, many surely had no idea what to do about it. Perhaps Palach was a philosophy student providing a torch to others to help them escape the darkness of despairing slumber; to do so, he asked them for solidarity in action: make demands on the government, wait, and when there is no response, launch a general strike. If the world remains asleep, friends would kill themselves too, to continue the alarm. It was meant to be a very shrill alarm. It seemed like it had fallen on deaf ears. Twenty years later, and as a meaningful symbol, the collective memory of Palach’s self-immolation entered the history books of the next generation, as they too started stepping across shadow lines in 1989.

During the protests against Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the importance of Bouazizi’s action in Tunisia remained a lucid source of debate. As one commentator wrote:

In history as in the lived and lively film of life, giant steps often result from little but creative and self-empowering dreams. The incapacity to dream is a slow death. Mohamed Bou’azizi’s act of self-immolation on December 17 related to all those concerned with the human condition...The right to dream cannot be entrusted to demagogues, megalomaniacs or leaders without the earnestness to be of import to their peoples. The masses want to dream their own dreams...Here begins reclamation and assumption of lost agency.⁷

The idea of agency and the idea of dissent are inextricably wed: dissent becomes a meaningful political phenomenon when the causes of such steps toward agency are plumbed from records of what came before, what preceded eruptions in the streets. What, in other words, makes the fear recede enough to allow people to step over the shadow lines that they would not have thought of crossing only days or weeks before?

The role of creative and self-empowering dreams, somewhere underneath the daily grind of life, when combined with a dramatic act of self-immolation by someone who had lost all his hope to dream, was the disturbing light that “woke up the people of this land” in 2011. The “people of this land,” furthermore, seems now to include anyone with the ability to observe events unfold in another part of our shrinking planet, anyone with a mobile phone, television, or Internet

connection. Bouazizi's act did indeed affect anyone "concerned with the human condition." The world became very small, and worldwide hopes grew accordingly large.

Self-immolation is an act of violence against the self. The possibilities of violence against others will also enter any dissident discourse: will they arrest us? Beat us? How badly will it hurt? Will we be tortured in prison? At what point do we hit back? In stark contrast to the peacefulness of events in Central Europe during 1989, the Chinese regime opened fire on prodemocracy protesters in Tiananmen Square that same year. The communist regimes of Central Europe, and Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet communist party, did not want to be like China. The protesters in Central Europe in 1989 did not face open fire.⁸ In 2011, the media coverage of events in Egypt was censored on China's intranet and very selectively reported on state TV; they emphasized the chaos, not the peaceful protests, and tried to suppress collective memories of Tiananmen.⁹ A few months before Bouazizi's self-immolation, imprisoned Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work supporting human rights. He was not allowed to attend the ceremony in Oslo, and his wife was put under house arrest when she returned to China to tell him about the award.¹⁰ The Chinese government ostracized various foreign delegations for honoring a supposedly seditious outlaw.¹¹

This book may indeed be about those thought of as seditious outlaws, and it was conceived long before the events of 2011. The images of Central Europe and Tiananmen within discussions of Egypt and the wider Middle East, however, are a reminder of how history gets mixed into the present, and how citing the case of Central Europe lent a meaningful backdrop for comparative discussion in a very different time and place. As moments of dissidence continue to unfold throughout the world, readers will have to judge for themselves whether such analogies are useful, or whether the parallels might not have become perpendiculars, given very different outcomes. Given that the texts written by these dissidents are old companions in my own search for the meaning of the "human condition," I hope to perpetuate a conversation about what "dissidence" means now, as much as what it meant then, before 1989. As much as this narrative is about the words and actions of dissidents, it is also about the intellectual process anyone can undertake to come to think differently about the world, to liberate one's mind from dogmatic fashions. The author of the famous book with the title *The Human Condition* fled an authoritarian regime; Hannah Arendt likely would have died had she stayed in Nazi Germany.¹² Wisdom emerges

from such times of urgency, reminding us of the problem of our own current condition as humans. Or maybe it *forces* it upon us. The question of meaning takes center stage during these dramatic and interconnected performances staged in the name of life itself. Such moments, and the texts that accompany them, remind us that stability, utility, and instrumental reason are not always the highest goods of human life. This story strives to be a momentary culmination of an irreversible intellectual empathy with the words of those dissidents and exiles seeking a more peaceful and less violent life. It is meant to be appreciated beyond the streets of Central Europe, beyond Tahrir Square in Cairo, and perhaps even beyond our memories of those places.

Introduction

To illuminate the importance and relevance of “dissidence” across time and place, this analysis is one part philosophy, one part political theory, and one part history. Woven together, this synthesis has three main elements: an historical description of a particular place and era where dissidence played a significant role (Central European communist states before 1989); a political-theoretic account of the type of ideas that give rise to dissidence more generally; and a philosophical account of how ideas of dissidence can illuminate certain parts of our selfhood and our relationship with others. This method approaches “dissidence” as a problem sufficiently complex to demand multiple lenses of analysis, not only because the action of dissidence is in itself analytically intricate, but also because Central European dissidents wrote about their ideas and their actions from within constraints that challenged the usual borders of political and philosophical analysis. Future dissidents who turn to these ideas for inspiration, furthermore, will also have to transcend these borders between politics, philosophy, and history in order to act in the world.

The method of this reconstruction also strives to match the content of the texts being studied: Central European dissidents did not see their politics, their history, and their philosophy as distinct problems. The wager of Yugoslav writer Mihajlo Mihajlov, for example, was that a political regime could not only create existential and philosophical crises, but that it could *be* such a crisis:

The solution to man’s crisis is not to be found in the political, social or economic spheres. It lies much deeper, in the existential, universal crisis of the personality, in the metaphysical depths of human beings. We must search in the writings of religious thinkers on the loss of God, and in the Marxist texts on human estrangement, which is to say, alienation—no less pronounced in a totalitarian society where mankind is made into a collective by force than it is in the capitalist

Horizons of the Dissident Life-World

What was once called “Eastern Europe” is now generally called “Central Europe,” but less formally.¹ The “Iron Curtain” that once separated the East and the West of Europe no longer exists politically, and most of “Eastern Europe” is now either part of the European Union (EU), or in some way involved in the EU admissions process. For the generation born after 1989, the different historical regions of Western, Eastern, and Central Europe might someday just be simply “Europe.” Whatever happens in the future, the time between the end of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has become its own delineated historical chapter, and remains in the memories of an older generation. Anthropologists might continue excavating the many cultural remnants of the East-West border for some time yet into the future, but as a phenomenon, that border is nonetheless becoming historical.²

Instead of reifying this time period and place as a static historical era that ended in 1989, however, to get at the motivations and perspectives of people living in this time, it is more useful to render a thematic description of a common “life-world” inhabited by dissidents after World War II left Europe divided. This will assist in opening up the hermeneutical horizons of these texts in this “encounter with tradition,” as this section roughly follows Hans-Georg Gadamer’s idea that the present is limited in its view, and that the horizons of our life-worlds can be expanded through encountering texts from standpoints and times beyond our own:

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of

Mutual Recognition in the Parallel Polis

If the previous section set out to sketch the historical and intellectual elements of the dissident life-world, this section will turn to the substance of the dissidents' writings to make a series of interrelated theoretical claims about the dissidents' relationship to political theory. By the account offered here, theorists of politics should turn to the dissidents' writings to find answers to our perennial questions about gathering together within "civil societies," the social dynamics of mutual recognition, and the existentialist dimension of rebellious politics. To make this point in a detailed and substantive way, however, these theorizations need to be discussed as political theory, that is, as something more than historical memorabilia of a certain moment in time, going beyond *Zeitgeist* and *Lebenswelt*.

By tying together an exegesis of the dissidents' writings with traditional political theory texts that address similar issues of concern, the conceit of this analysis is that the dissidents were not just derivative of their particular context, but they spoke to universal themes that will continue to matter and have meaning in the future. To make this argument, I present a conversation in this chapter between the dissidents and G. W. F Hegel, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Hannah Arendt. (This is one conversation among many that one could enact, and chapter 3 will turn to another possibility, i.e., a conversation about phenomenology and existentialism.) Thomas Hobbes speaks here too, because like the moderator on the panel discussion, his provocations help give rise to the central issues responded to by others. Hobbes's observations about the brutishness of human relations (and how associations might ameliorate this brutishness) are not entirely out of date contemporarily, even if both Hegel and Tocqueville were trying to move beyond his categories by challenging his assumptions about

Toward an Existential Recognition: The Self and Other in Dissidence

Central European dissidents were trying to change the patterns of intersubjective relations between themselves and their fellow dissidents through their association with one another. Following the argument presented in the previous section, gathering together became a way to endure and enrich the various aesthetic and psychological challenges created by the life-world of authoritarianism, including the fear of speaking out and the overabundance of official clichés. Such coming together also mattered, as Emmanuel Levinas might have intimated, because it was a way of addressing the existential costs of the facelessness of power. Levinas writes: “Recognition by submission would annul my dignity through which recognition has value. The face that looks at me affirms me. But, face-to-face, I can no longer deny the other: it is only the noumenal glory of the other that makes the face-to-face situation possible. The face to face situation is thus an impossibility of denying, a negation of negation.”¹ In the totality of totalitarianism, seeking intersubjective recognition through face-to-face situations, as Levinas might also say, was a way to relate to the infinity of the world.

Each in a different way, Tocqueville, Hegel, and Arendt understood the importance of face-to-face interaction not just for dissidence, and not just for politics and civil society gatherings more generally, but also for coming to an understanding of the self. Intersubjective recognition is, ultimately, two subjects interacting, coming to know not just the other, but also coming to know the self through the eyes of another. Philosophers have always been concerned with the problem of the relationship between the self and the other, especially this moment Levinas cites, where it becomes impossible to deny the other, and where you

Conclusion

As if I Were a Dissident: A Guide to Thinking and Acting

This journey through questions of dissent has aimed at both the development of new questions and the rearticulation of old questions. As the philosophical and political problems within the texts presented here are, in many respects, not at all new, this conversation has sought to synthesize ideas from the past that can speak toward the future. A statement by Mihajlo Mihajlov might be one final guide (in the dissidents' own words) to show us how, specifically, this account might speak to the future:

The religious, philosophical question about whether there is justice in the universe becomes in our time a practical question; and on its answer depends everything—our life, history, and the future of mankind... Religious rebirth is not a theoretical or ideological matter. There is no need for an all-embracing theory giving precepts of what to do. Rather, one has to be able again to feel in oneself that internal compass which every minute of life shows the only right direction for action, to have faith in it, and to follow its directions, despite any deadly threats... But what punishments and purges are still awaiting us in order that we might be capable of so living?¹

If it might be possible to extend Mihajlov's statement to argue that "the philosophical question about whether there is justice in the universe becomes in [*every*] time a practical question," then the philosophical principles presented in this account might be relevant for dissidents in any time or place as they undertake the practical task of figuring out how to dissent and ask questions of those in positions of power.