

CIVIL COURAGE IN EASTERN EUROPE

As the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka affirmed, the main educational value of the efforts made by dissidents is to offer an alternative human experience to the pervasive nihilism of totalitarian societies. Given its negative connotation, dissidents do not like to be defined with this word. As Vaclav Havel explains: “It is obvious that men who have simply decided to live within the truth, to proclaim out loud what they believe, and to behave according to their own “best ego” cannot accept that their original, positive stance should be defined negatively ...and above all they cannot bear being defined as those who are against this or that and not simply as those that are this or that”.

In his most famous work, *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel describes man’s moral decadence in post-totalitarian systems: corruption, hypocrisy, fear, subservience. Those who decide to abandon life within a lie in order to live within the truth immediately become enemies. For post-totalitarian systems, service to truth is dangerous because it does not only have an existential dimension, but, by revealing life within a lie and by exposing the mechanisms of power, it has *per se* a political dimension too.

The clash of these two opposing forces takes place first all in the human conscience, at an existential level, and only later can be expressed outwardly. At a personal level the next step is to join other like-minded people, people with a shared vision and a shared sense of responsibility for others. By joining forces in this way, “dissidents” can create what the Prague philosopher Vaclav Benda ingeniously called the “parallel polis”, by which he meant alternative social communities within oppressed societies, with living space for cultural, social and human freedom. Spaces conceived not as fortunate oases in a world of appearances and falsehood, but as spaces in which responsibility for the whole of society can be achieved. This was how the signatories of Charta ’77 hoped to re-awaken the consciences of the Czechoslovak people.

The fulcrum is always and only the individual with his conscience and his personal sense of responsibility:

And again Havel says: “No real, thorough and stable improvement in the country’s institutions can be based on a traditional political project, but will have to start from the individual, from a substantial re-think of his position in the world, of his relationship with himself, with others, with the universe.” And he continues: “Implicit in the dissident’s approach is to start from the reality of human existence here and now and to believe more in what little has been achieved a

thousand times and consistently, even if it is a question of alleviating the suffering of just one ordinary person, than in an abstract and remote global solution”.

There is a link between the search for truth pursued by the Czechoslovak “dissidents” and what happened in Poland, especially after 1980.

In both these experiences the fulcrum is always the individual and his conscience, which refuses to live within a lie and sees that his own dignity and his own freedom are infinitely greater, and unshakeable. It was no coincidence that relations between the Polish “dissidents” and Charter ’77 were intense and systematic.

The history of the Solidarnosc trade union, set up in Danzig in 1980 and successor to the previous, often tragic, post-war Polish workers’ experiences, shows that Solidarnosc was much more than just a trade union; it was an authentic nation-wide movement that saw intellectuals, students and priests siding with the workers and it had its roots in the concerted efforts made after 1976 by the intellectuals of the Polish Workers’ Defence Committee (KOR), by the underground press and by the Church. There is no doubt that the election to the papal throne of the cardinal of Cracow, Karol Wojtyla and his first visit as pope to his native country in 1979 were also decisive in reawakening a sense of national identity.

Not even the introduction of a State of War, on 13 December 1981, succeeded in stifling the trade union experience. 1982 to 1989 were years of great intellectual and social fervour, Solidarność re-organized itself into underground cells that disseminated information and promoted social solidarity, despite the particularly harsh repressive measures enforced by the regime. When recalling the years of clandestine resistance underground, Konstanty Gebert – one of the leading lights of Solidarność – said: “Those that had or that found the courage or the good fortune to oppose, were already free. It is a mistake to say that it is dictatorships that steal our freedom. Freedom cannot be stolen. Freedom is something that belongs to each of us, to every individual. Whether you live in a free country or under a dictatorship, you always have to live with freedom inside your head. The friends of the opposition movement, of life underground, were fortunate enough to inhabit a free country already, even if that free country had the circumference of their own heads: if you fail to achieve individual, inner freedom, you will never achieve social or political freedom. Only free men can build freedom and more than anything you become free within yourself.”