THE SACRED AND THE MYTH: HAVEL'S GREENGROCER AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF IDEOLOGY IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Marci Shore
University of Toronto

> There is nothing a free man is so anxious to do as to find something to worship. But it must be something unquestionable, that all men can agree to worship communally. For the great concern of these miserable creatures is not that every individual should find something to worship that he personally considers worthy of worship, but that they should find something in which they can all believe and which they can all worship *in common;* it is essential that it should be in common. And it is precisely that requirement of *shared* worship that has been the principal source of suffering for individual man and the human race since the beginning of history. In their efforts to impose universal worship, men have unsheathed their swords and killed one another. Fyodor Dostoevsky (306)

> 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 or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.
> Václav Havel (37)

The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia arrived as a symbolically gentle conclusion to a half-century long era of harrowing violence and totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. It was an era that saw the emergence of Nazism, Stalinism, and various indigenous fascisms, effecting a startling demonstration of the potency of ideology to co-opt minds and to wreak violence. The existence of communist ideology as a myth cohering communist totalitarian societies has been widely enough asserted. Yet this analysis can be taken to a further level through the aid of two paradigms. The first is a theory of human relationships developed by René Girard, which blends the disciplines of literary criticism, anthropology, philosophy, and political science. The second is a model arising from Václav Havel's parable of the greengrocer, told in "The Power of the Powerless" (1979). Girard's model posits the existence of the sacred, that locus of power that was once the pole of primitive religions. The core of the sacred is transfigured human violence. Girardian scholar Robert Hamerton-Kelly explains the process by which the sacred comes into being:

> Girard tells us that [the sacred] is a mendacious representation of human violence; "it is the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis." The element of "the overwhelming" defines the Sacred...but its primary content is violence understood as being...outside of normal human control. (142)

The sacred is established as the result of a crisis, one which finds resolution in the purging of a relatively arbitrary scapegoat. Following this catharsis, three expressions sustain the sacred: myth, ritual, and prohibition. An examination of the evolution of these expressions in Czechoslovakia from the Stalinist period through normalization (the so-termed "post-totalitarian" period described by Havel in his essay) reveals much about the paradoxical dynamics of ideologically-based totalitarianism—which Havel defines most poignantly by suggesting that at the essence of ideological totalitarianism is the collapsing of the traditional dichotomy between victim and oppressor.

A Girardian deconstruction of Stalinism

A political space for Stalinism developed in Czechoslovakia through the tumultuous period of Nazi occupation and the communist nature of anti-Nazi resistance. By the eve of the 1948 communist coup, the communists had claimed thirty-eight percent of the popular vote in free elections. Milan Kundera describes the coup as a usurpation of power "not in bloodshed and violence, but to the cheers of about half the population" (1986, 8). Defining this initial fanaticism was its honesty, especially among the younger generation. A young Stalinist later to become a reformist, and still later a dissident, Zdenek Mlynár, explains, "these earlier political convictions of ours led us to the Communist Party and its ideology, not out of a sense of political calculation or ulterior motivation, but from inner persuasion" (2). Visions of nirvana abounded; and an inherent, sacred justness in the communist mission was as widely believed as it was constantly articulated. The pride of young Party members went beyond their resulting social privilege—they were the heralds of a new utopia. A generation of young Stalinists, who decades later would become the reformists under Dubcek, and afterwards some of the most tenacious dissidents, were the most dedicated Stalinists in the early days of communist rule. Reflecting on the Stalinist years in *Nightfrost in Prague,* Mlynár writes, "We perceived any argument used to counter our primitive radicalism as stemming from cowardice" (1). He says further, "We are also responsible for our beliefs. And the fact that I was a believer does not absolve me from guilt, but rather is an admission that I share that guilt" (4).

At this point it is relevant to turn to Girard's literary conception of myth, according to which myth exists as a story of a sacrifice as told from the perspective of the executioners, or alternatively as a story of unity told in such a way as to occlude entirely its violent foundations. In the case of Marxism, myth consisted of a teleological version of history constructed in support of the prophecy that the workers of the world were destined to unite and create a Utopian society. The workers' unification was predicated on the simultaneous expulsion of the bourgeoisie (including both the remnants of the old aristocracy, as well as the ideological believers in capitalism) and the non-Marxist intelligentsia. The latter category was extended to include all those who deviated from official doctrine and so quickly acquired the fatal status of "Western imperialists," "Zionist conspirators," "bourgeois nationalists," or simply, "agents of the West." The ever-present threat for those who deviated from the Party line was that of expulsion—the reality of which transcended expulsion from the Party

and implied expulsion from all forms of political, social and civic life—including literal execution during the era of the purges and show trials.

The scapegoating sanctified by myth is a phenomenon indicative at once of both human banality and viciousness. An eloquent illustration of Stalinist scapegoating occurs in Kundera's novel *The Joke.* In the novel, student and Party member Ludvík, a dedicated communist full of conviction, is put on trial as the result of a postcard he had sent to his Party-member girlfriend as a joke, which read, "Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!" Despite the fact that Ludvík is tried before a jury of friends and peers, the verdict against him is executed unanimously. Ludvík is expelled from both the Party and the university. Deprived of his status and his life, he is conscripted into the Black Insignia division of the military, reserved for undesirables, and spends years working in the mines.

Kundera's description of the process by which Lunik is condemned is straightforward: "Yes, every last one of them raised his hand to approve my expulsion" (46). A Girardian reading suggests that it was precisely the act of expelling Ludvík which gave impetus to their remarkable unity and correspondingly, to the strength inherent in such unanimity. Ludvík's purging serves as a catharsis enabling order to be restored. Although Ludvík is innocent, he is identified by the group as having been the cause of chaos, a misattribution that is proven retrospectively and reinforced by an inverse logic: if the sacrifice of Lunik spawns order, then it follows that it was his existence that caused disorder.[1]

Gradually Ludvík begins to comprehend this process; later in his life, he experiences the epiphany that had he been a member of the jury rather than the defendant, it is likely that he also would have raised his hand. Ultimately, it is not Ludvík's expulsion from the Party, but rather his realization of both the power and uninspired simplicity of the Party's unanimity that dooms him to unhappiness.

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[1] Harnerton-Keliy elaborates on the "Generative Mimetic Scapegoating Mechanism": "Thus the victim is at most a catalyst and at least only the passive object of the violence; he or she is not the cause. The mob, however makes the victim the cause, and by so doing obscures its own violence from itself and transfers it to the victim. The first illusion is 'the illusion of the supremely active and all-powerful victim': it makes the victim a god, placing him or her above the group as the transcendent cause of both order and disorder" (140).

> Since then, whenever I make new acquaintances, men or women with the potential of becoming friends or lovers, I project them back into that time, that hall, and ask myself whether they would have raised their hands; no one has ever passed the test: every one of them has raised his hand in the same way my former friends and colleagues (willingly or not, out of fear or conviction) raised theirs. (76)

Prohibition, ritual, and myth, as elements that sanctify scapegoating and so sustain order, are inextricably interrelated. The legitimacy of the prohibitions is reinforced by the controlled performance of rituals, which are in turn justified by the narrative of myth. Rituals are prescribed, symbolic reenactments of the original sacrifice. They assert the legitimacy of the sacrifices made and reinforce the primacy and sanctity of the power structure. Under the Stalinist regime (as is true in some form in all societies), rituals were obligatory. Illustrative are the May Day and October parades (the Communist Party usurped religious and state holidays, replacing the October 17th Independence Day with Nationalization Day). Former dissident Jan Urban describes, "As kids, we loved it. It was beautiful, we believed in it... Many people remember the May Day parade of '68 when no one was organizing anything [but thousands and thousands showed up]."[2] Other rituals included the displaying of the flag at prescribed times and the continual display of signs in store windows. The latter included such slogans as "Socialism—is a child's smile" and "Workers of the work unite!" These slogans generated metonymic associations with all of society's happiness at the same time that they effectively obscured the marginalization and/or victimization of those excluded from the unity.

Storefront banners comprised a more passive ritual serving to contain chaos. Life in communist Czechoslovakia was regimented by an abundance of mandatory activities. Returning to Kundera's literary depiction of Stalinism, Ludvík one day wanders into a church when he arrives early at a town square for a rendezvous. Inside the church, Ludvík watches an elaborate ceremony, which revolves around women holding infants and young children dressed in identical red scarves presenting these mothers with bouquets of roses. Upon the ceremony's conclusion, Ludvík is greeted by Kovalik, a childhood friend and now one of the organizers of the

[2] Jan Urban, Personal Interview, 30 August 1993.

ceremony. When Ludvík inquires of Kovalik whether the previous ceremony had been a christening, Kovalik corrects his old classmate and tells Ludvík that the ceremony had been a *welcoming of new citizens to life.* It was just such ceremonies, Kovalik attests, which will allow the Party to triumph in severing the regressive, archaic attachment felt by the people towards the Church.

> [Ludvík] nodded and asked whether there might not be a more effective way of weaning people away from religious ceremonies, to give them the option of avoiding *any* sort of ceremony whatsoever.
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> [Kovalik] said that people would never give up their weddings and funerals. And from our point of view . . . . it would be a pity not to use them to bring people closer to our ideology and our State.
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> I asked my old classmate what he did with people who didn't want to take part in such ceremonies, whether there were any such people. He said of course there were, since not everybody had come round to the new way of thinking yet, but if they didn't attend, they kept receiving invitations, and most of them came in sooner or later, after a week or two. I asked him whether attendance at such ceremonies was compulsory. He replied with a smile that it wasn't, but that the National Committee used attendance as a touchstone for evaluating people's sense of citizenship and their attitude towards the State, and in the end people realized that and came.
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> In that case, I said, the National Committee was stricter with its believers than the Church was with theirs. Kovalik smiled and said that could not be helped. (172-3)

The complementary counterpart to prescriptive rituals are prohibitions: the first reinforces ideology while the second protects it. Prohibitions are those restrictions which seek to prevent actions or expressions threatening to the existing order. More specifically, prohibitions are directed against expressions of individualism that threaten to weaken society's unanimity and to release once more the contained chaos within society. Under Stalinist regimes, prohibitions consisted of restrictions against profit, class superiority, and anti-ideological expression. The system condemned the bourgeoisie for their acquisition of material wealth, and the intellectuals for a less tangible form of superiority which was equally feared. The first communist prohibition against profit defines the economic element of the

communist regime: authorities abolished private entrepreneurship and private ownership, as well as inherited wealth. The state owned industries, subsidized rent, food and other commodity prices, and distributed (allegedly equitably) wages. Living standards were more or less equal throughout the country, with workers living as well as members of professional occupations. Theoretically, such measures deterred resentment and *a priori* precluded competition and envy.

More complicated, however, were those prohibitions against intellectual superiority and anti-ideological expression. These were necessarily more difficult to define than those against economic wealth. During the early Stalinist period, the Party often distinguished between Marxist writers, artists and academics—"cultural communists"—and intellectuals, a term laden with critical animosity. "Intellectualism" was an accusation often concomitant with that of "individualism," implicating a withdrawal from unity. Returning to Kundera, Ludvík describes his evaluations by his Party student group (during the time before his expulsion) as generally positive, although often concluding with a sharp comment to the effect of '"harbors traces of individualism.'" At times, Ludvík says,

> I defended myself against the charge of individualism and demanded from the others proof that I was an individualist. For want of concrete evidence they would say, "It's the way you behave." "How do I behave?" "You have a strange kind of smile." "And if I do? That's how I express my joy." "No, you smile as though you were thinking to yourself."
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> When the Comrades classified my conduct and smile as intellectual (another notorious pejorative of the times), I actually came to believe them because I couldn't imagine (I wasn't bold enough to imagine) that everyone else might be wrong, that the Revolution itself, the spirit of the times, might be wrong, and I, an individual, might be right. (32)[3]

A metonymic chain of signifiers progressed from individualism to intellectualism to superiority. This last term symbolized a fundamental contradiction to Marxism, whose doctrine was adamantly egalitarian. This

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[3]Another communist, a young woman in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* accuses her lover, also a Party member, of making love to her "like an intellectual." Kundera accordingly clarifies that "in the political jargon of the day 'intellectual' was an expletive" (5).

egalitarianism was enveloped in a rigid structure designed to preclude any disorderly competition resulting from inequity.[4] It was an egalitarianism which failed to exist naturally, but rather which needed to be shielded from natural impulses through the prohibition of any action or expression potentially threatening to it.[5]

More prevalent were those prohibitions against forms of expression which existed in contradiction to the ideological myth of communism. These included large-scale restrictions on movement as well as less conspicuous, seemingly absurd limitations. The former category included prohibitions against traveling to noncommunist countries, restrictions which were enforced so as to prevent comparisons with competing ideas. The latter included bureaucratic regulations such as the names list, which included all acceptable names from which parents could choose upon naming their child. The regime excluded obviously Christian names, such as Mary Magdalene, and prevented parents from selecting them. The theory prophesied that if these prohibitions were violated, history would be propelled backwards, the former victims would re-emerge and seek vengeance, and the entire cycle of chaos, sacrifice, and the reinstitution of a new order would be repeated.

Underlying the attachment to myth, ritual and prohibition is the fear of chaos. In defining myth, Girard explains, "myths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them" (64). Myths serve to justify and sanctify any violence that has been committed as having been good and necessary to expel the bad violence formerly generated by the sacrificial victims. What in more ancient times had been the literal telling of the story of the murder from the perspective of the murderers, now exists in a more symbolic fashion. The Girardian concept of myth is equivalent

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[4] **A Girardian analysis yields the conclusion that precisely such fanatical egalitarianism made communist societies particularly dangerous to mimetic disorder. Historically, the external nature of mediation, as in distinctly hierarchical societies where social differences were so great so as to preclude direct imitation, acted as a safety valve. Thus communism, which ideally attempted to collapse all social class-based hierarchies and create a purely** egalitarian society reached the extreme end of the historical shift from external to internal mediation. Since internal mediation produces more direct imitation, competition, rivalry and **finally violence, communist societies were theoretically extremely vulnerable to this type of disorder if prohibitions were to fail and mimesis were again unleashed.**

[5] **It became increasingly evident, however, that a purely classless society was illusory. See *The New Class,* by former Titoist Party official Milovan Djilas.**

to what Havel indicts as "the lie" upon which the communist regime maintained its power:

> 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. (31)

Havel goes on to say that as a result of these mystifications, "the disorder of real history is replaced by the orderliness of pseudo-history" (61). It is a history from which contradictions have been removed and the justness of the new order is legitimated. Havel's comment so serves as an appropriate transition to myth, ritual, and prohibition as they evolved from Stalinist to post-Stalinist communist Czechoslovakia. In addition, the comment underscores the aforementioned difficulty of defining clear dichotomies between the oppressor-regime and victim-people in the post-totalitarian system. As Havel suggests, one of the most complex and analytically interesting aspects of the Czechoslovak case is the extent to which ideology retained its efficacy, albeit in a reconstrued form, even as belief in the myth steadily dissipated. The diminishing of genuine belief in ideology resulted in a system in crisis. The nature of this crisis and of the complexity of communist totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia, the use of prohibition and ritual as they were employed by the regime, and the efficacy of myth even as belief in it steadily dissipated are revealed through a close reading of "The Power of the Powerless."

A Girardian reading of Havel's greengrocer

Havel tells the story of the greengrocer to explicate the philosophical rationale for the nature of dissent in Czechoslovakia during the normalization period. In the essay "The Power of the Powerless," Havel defines

dissident, opposition, anti-political politics, and the system of government he terms *post-totalitarianism.* In doing so, he illuminates two thematic cleavages which dominated discourse in Eastern Europe during the communist period: public versus private and truth versus lies. Central to this essay and the exploration of these themes is Havel's development of the paradigm of the greengrocer, a model he uses to illustrate the pillars and mechanisms of the post-totalitarian system.

The parable begins with the introduction of our neighbor the greengrocer. He is nameless because he can be any one of us. It is morning and the greengrocer is placing in his window, along with the vegetables delivered that day, the sign proclaiming, "Workers of the World Unite!" Why does the greengrocer place that sign in the window? Is it his sincere, spontaneous desire to acquaint the public with his socialist consciousness that prompts him to move his carrots to the side to make room for this slogan? Has he thought long and hard about which sign to display in the interest of finding one most closely in accord with his personal convictions? Has his own intellectual development, after much soul-searching, led him to Marxism and consequently to the profound goal of working towards the worldwide unification of the proletariat?

Havel conjectures that these questions should be answered in the negative. Our greengrocer likely gives little or no thought to the sign he daily puts in his window along with the tomatoes and cucumbers. The slogan very possibly does not represent those opinions he expresses in private. It is, nonetheless, a highly communicative action. Why then does he choose to display the poster? Havel answers that the public display of the Marxist slogan is a *sign* to the public and the regime; it is one of the prescribed *rituals* requisite for living in a communist society.

Correspondingly, Havel assumes that the greengrocer's message to the public and to the regime is not so much one of socialist enthusiasm as it is one of obedience. A Girardian reading identifies the greengrocer as complicitous in concealing violence by means of this hypocritical sign. The latter is not merely harmless. For the statement "Workers of the World Unite!" obscures the exclusion of nonworkers as well as the consequences of this exclusion. This conformity to tacitly prescribed ritual allows the greengrocer to live in peace. As a member of the mob by his mythic token, he will remain safely part of that mob, separated from those who may be chosen as victims. Placing the "Workers of the World Unite!" sign in his window every morning is a profoundly self-serving gesture.

That this display does, in fact, promote the greengrocer's self-interest can be illustrated most vividly by imagining the reverse case: that is, what would be the consequences if one morning, the greengrocer were to make the decision to leave the sign behind the counter, perhaps at the bottom of a box of rotten tomatoes? A Party member might chastise the greengrocer for his negligence. Continued disobedience could result in more insistent reproaches. A secret police informer might report the greengrocer for disloyalty. Harassment, interrogation, and the loss of his position as store manager are among the possibilities that would probably ensue. He would be expelled from inside the system to outside of it. In Girardian terms, taking the sign down would make the greengrocer an acceptable target for sacrifice. As a potential victim, the greengrocer would henceforth view the sacrificial system through the eyes of its victims. He would then be living in truth.

Havel theorizes that the probable persecution of the disobedient greengrocer would not come about without reason. On the contrary, the fact that the greengrocer cannot choose not to hang his sign with impunity suggests that the displaying of this sign is quite important to the authorities. The possibility of the greengrocer's refusal to obey would constitute, for some reason, a considerable threat to those in power. Clearly the next point of interest is why. The facts, at first glance, are paradoxical: Our greengrocer, seemingly unimportant and powerless, nevertheless has the potential to threaten the regime with an action as small as neglecting to hang a certain sign in his window. In fact, if all the greengrocers one day took down their signs, precisely this act would be the beginning of a revolution. Invariably this leads to the conclusion that the powerless greengrocer is not so powerless after all. On the contrary, he is quite powerful. Hence, he is responsible and can therefore be guilty. Havel elaborates on this point:

> We have seen that the real meaning of the greengrocer's slogan has nothing to do with what the text of the slogan actually says. Even so, the real meaning is quite clear and generally comprehensible because the code is so familiar: the greengrocer declares his loyalty in the only way the regime is capable of hearing; that is, by accepting the prescribed *ritual,* by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place. (31)

In the following sections of his essay, Havel elucidates the point that the nature of the greengrocer's paradoxical power is intimately related to the particular character of the communist system (i.e., as the manifestation of the sacred). In order to understand the nature of this system, it is first necessary to examine actions such as the exhibition of Marxist phraseology by the greencover. This display is only one of the prescribed rituals required of members of the communist society. Other examples are readily discerned; these rituals, in fact, to an extent dominated the society. "Workers of the World Unite!" signs were complemented by "Social-ISM- IS A CHILD'S Smile" signs (Ash 1986, 217). Overflowing crowds at May Day and October parades existed due to mandatory attendance. In the Girardian model, rituals such as these possess special properties. Their raison d'être is to sustain the sacrificial power structure. Ritualistic actions reenact the unity of the myth and justify expulsion of victims by symbolically performing and/or alluding to these sacrifices in a controlled and therefore safe manner. The prescription "Workers of the World Unite!" subliminally contains the accompanying message that nonworkers be excluded. In celebrating the unified peace, the slogan ignores the violent foundations of that peace and so obscures them from public consciousness. The myth is one of unity whereas the casting out of victims in the process of creating that unity is legitimated and sanctified by reinforcing its necessity.

Havel explains, "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" (28). Ideology parallels myth in its identify as narrative, a monopolistic historical narrative written so as to justify the current occupation of power. It is a phenomenon witnessed with clarity in Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Soviet invasion (officially enacted by the Warsaw Pact and termed by the subsequently-installed regime "brotherly help"). As "normalization" was inaugurated, a new censorship law formally banned all texts "defending the pre-Munich Czechoslovak Republic" (Judt220). One hundred forty-five Czechoslovak historians were expelled from the universities. Their books disappeared from bookstores and libraries. History was literally replaced by anew version written by a new regime. For those exiled from the academy, the new president, Gustav Husák, became known as "the president of forgetting."

Truth was thus held captive by ideology which artistically concealed its sacrificial basis with grandiose rhetoric and seemingly profound slogans

chanted in unison—our familiar "Workers of the World Unite!" The performance of rituals such as that done by the greengrocer would be meaningless, or more specifically impossible, in the absence of the larger myth that surrounds them. These rituals, such as the sign displayed by the greengrocer, exist implicitly for the purpose of legitimizing and reinforcing the ideological myth. Their obedient performance continually attests to the regime's ability to prescribe and mandate behavior; and the repetition itself becomes the foundation of propaganda.

At this point the foundation exists for the phenomenon which Havel terms *post-totalitarianism.* He clarifies in his essay that by using this term he does not mean to imply that the Czechoslovak communist system is no longer totalitarian, but rather that it embodies a new form of totalitarianism, one containing within itself a particularly harsh duality, perhaps best expressed by the frequently invoked metaphor that while all unanimously express their admiration for the emperor's new clothes, everyone is more or less cognizant of the fact that no one can see them. What Havel defines as post-totalitarianism can more explicitly be described by the phrase *ideological totalitarianism,* or, concerning specifically the normalization period, *post-ideological totalitarianism.* Conventional dictatorial regimes wielded a monopoly on power through an emphasis on coercive means such as brute force. A tangible and literal threat of physical violence surrounded the populace and ensured compliance with the regime's dictates. In contrast, the post-totalitarian system exercises power through manipulative means more subtle and complex. Kundera warns us not to forget that the communists took power "not by bloodshed and violence, but to the cheers of about half of the population." "And please note," he continues, "that the half that cheered was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better half (1986, 8).

Under post-totalitarianism, obedience to the ruling power is assured through the manipulative creation of a unified polity. Individual identities are firmly rooted in that of the sacrificial collective. Ideology—which in the case of Czechoslovakia meant Marxism as encapsulated by the phrase "Workers of the World Unite!"—compensates for, as well as superimposes itself over, individual truths. Rituals replace meaningful sources of personal expression. Individual identities are subordinated to the collective identity of all members of society as Marxists—i.e. members of the system regardless of whether or not they are formally members of the Party. In the same way that communist ideology functions as myth, the Communist Party functions as the manifestation of the sacred. Thus the regime, hiding

behind the banner of dispensing socialist liberation, in reality exists as transfigured human violence. It simultaneously conceals and justifies the sacrifice of dissident philosopher Jan Patocka and others as having been critical to ensure the continued unity of society, in such a way as continually to obscure the violent foundations upon which the new order is based.[6]

> In this way the traditional dichotomy between oppressor-dictator and victim-populace collapses and reemerges as an infinitely more complex relationship. Societal cohesion is achieved through the binding glue of mythical ideology wedding the public to the regime and creating a perception of an infinitely fulfilling relationship, which is at the very least non-exploitative. 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 . . . 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 or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system. (37)

Here neither Girard's nor Havel's indictment of society at large can be ignored. Underlying Havel's gentle eloquence is his harsh insistence on responsibility. In *The Brothers Karamazov,* Dostoevsky expresses the revelation that if God is dead, then we can kill. In a somewhat analogous, albeit antithetical, fashion, Havel asserts that if powerlessness is illusory, then we are all responsible—in the case of Czechoslovakia, responsible for the communist regime, which, existing as the Girardian sacred, cloaks itself in ideology and thus conceals its true nature as transformed violence. This violence is not violence perpetrated exclusively by a dictator, but rather is violence whose origins and causes underlie the whole of society. While a dictator who usurped power through naked force bears the entirety of the responsibility for the oppression ensuing from his rule, the dominance of power by ideology requires that responsibility be dispersed throughout the

[6] The much revered Czech philosopher died immediately after being subjected to prolonged police interrogations as a result of his involvement as spokesperson for the human rights document Charter 77.

population, including even those seemingly innocent such as the greengrocer. For it is the greengrocer and his peers who must continually give assent to the regime's power.

The power of ideology to collapse the dichotomy between victim and oppressor constitutes one of the pillars of the post-totalitarian system. The whole of society, including the regime, becomes captive to the ideology which justifies it. This engenders the paradox, Havel explains: "rather than theory, or rather ideology, serving power, power begins to serve ideology. It is as though ideology had appropriated power from power, as though it had become dictator itself. It then appears that theory itself, ritual itself, ideology itself, makes decisions that affect people, not the other way around" (33). It is a demonstration of the power of ideas to make individual will and personal beliefs subservient to a larger myth. In this way, the rule of the sacred is defined by the ideology which encloses it over and above any individual who at a given time may assume the authority to define that ideology. Hence it is not Gottwald, Novotný, Husák or Jakes whose names are displayed in the greengrocer's window—instead it is the Marxist myth.

Here the exact nature of Havel's indictment of the public requires clarification. A natural corollary to both Girard's and Havel's paradigms insists that for the ideological system to function with stability, the myth must retain a genuine potency. Therefore, belief in the necessity of scapegoating must continue to exist—a belief cultivated by the powerful through the very act of committing the sacrifice. The impunity of the perpetrators of violence results only from the sincere delusion that those sacrifices are sanctified because they are necessary for peace and unity. Such was more or less the case in Czechoslovakia before 1968, as evidenced by the bloody show trials of Slánský and others. These conspicuous murders could occur only because they were viewed by the Party—who had a large part of the public's support—as cleansing mechanisms critical for society to be purged of those who cause disorder.

Normalization: rituals become ritualized

That the situation changed radically after 1968 was not coincidental. Until the brutal crushing of Alexander Dubcek's reformist government in 1968, the communist regime's attempt to move away from violence by cultivating a society immersed in myth was to a large extent successful. Public displays of brutal violence were efficacious as rallying mechanisms. Fifteen years after the show trials, communist ideology had undergone a democratic evolution within Czechoslovak society. Marxist ideology

remained dominant; and the incorporation of democratic reformist elements into Marxism further contributed to that impression of legitimacy. This being the case, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Prague and defeat of Dubcek's popularly-supported program of "socialism with a human face" was ultimately counterproductive to communist interests, as it revealed violence precisely as such. The graphically vivid violence of the Soviet invasion was no longer perceived by the populace as being critical to the preservation of societal unity—in fact, the invasion was viewed by the vast majority as causing the destruction of a particularly harmonious Marxist polity.

Hence was inaugurated the transition from believed rituals to "ritual rituals" (i.e., the *recognition* of rituals as only token gestures of coercion), the era that dissident Marxist philosopher Miroslav Kusý describes as the era and ideology of "as if." In Girardian terms, totalitarianism experiences a descent into a "post-sacrificial" system (i.e., one in which the original sacrifices are no longer viewed as a legitimate catharsis, and so chaos is always brewing below the surface, threatening to be unleashed if the superficiality of rituals is acknowledged) when the people state openly that their emperor is wearing no clothes. The new communist regime led by Husák operated under the disadvantage that the public viewed the myth insistently dispersed by the regime with increasing suspicion. Participation in rituals remained compulsory; but those rituals had become largely superficial. Czechoslovakia had entered into a period of sacrificial crisis, that state which Girard ascertains exists when the sustaining mechanisms of power begin to lose their efficacy.

It is this period which comprises the subject of Havel's essay. The greengrocer can be contrasted with Kundera's Ludvík, Marketa, and Helena in *The Joke* by the fact of his relative apathy and the consequent hollowness of his Marxist gesture. In the former case, Kundera's characters perform the rites of communism with a sense of passion and purpose; in the latter, the greengrocer's action is merely habitual. During the post-Stalinist period, the public no longer tolerated (nor did the Party) graphic executions as it had during the Stalinist era. Public attitudes towards the punishment of nonconformists ranged from condoning to acquiescent, rather than enthusiastic. What the populace did continue to tolerate were the ritualized, symbolic sacrifices of those who dissented. In Patocka's case, this sacrifice was literal. In most other instances, however, nonconformists were cleansed through coerced exile, harassment, and imprisonment. The population, no longer so enthusiastic but nonetheless obedient, permitted the continuance of these ritualized sacrifices hallowed by communist

necessity, revealing what Havel terms "the primary excusatory function of ideology" (28). Ideology became a constant, token reference point, a rationalization for a self-protective obedience that enabled one to escape responsibility for the violent foundations of that order. As introduced earlier, on this basis Havel's judgment on his own country is both harsh and illuminating of a dialectical relationship: the people are at once "victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system" (28).

It is in response to this modern phenomenon of ideological totalitarianism that dissent in Czechoslovakia originated. Accordingly, Havel carefully explains that just as post-totalitarianism does not operate on the same principles as did classical dictatorship, Czechoslovak dissent is not equivalent to traditional political opposition. The element of opposition politics that becomes useless in the post-totalitarian system is its placement on the same plane as the regime it opposes. Opposition traditionally has operated within the realm of politics. Conversely, Czechoslovak dissent was comprised of explicitly "anti-political" politics. It formed in reaction to the special characteristic of the post-totalitarian system which Havel defines as "the centre of power [being] identical with the centre of truth" (25). As a result of this, the deconstruction of power could occur only through the deconstruction of the false claim to truth inherent in that power. Activities such as Charter 77 and the writing and dissemination *of samizdat* literature focused on exposing alternative narratives of past and present history—which, by their very existence, threaten the legitimacy of the ideological myth. It was a seemingly indirect form of attack on the system which nevertheless aimed at emasculating precisely the very core of the system, rather than attacking the more conspicuous manifestations of oppression. At this point the significance of the recurrent theme throughout Czechoslovak dissident literature of "living in truth" becomes clear. "If the main pillar of the system is living a lie," Havel writes, "then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth" (40).

For Havel ideological truth is intrinsically contradictory. The greengrocer's poster is the manifestation of falsehood because the ideas displayed are not the greengrocer's own in the sense that they are not internally generated. Only reality as perceived by individuals—particularly those cast out of the system who no longer participate in the collective myth—can rise above the lies. Havel's conception is such that, implicitly, truth can exist only at the level of the individual. A truthful society necessarily implies a pluralistic one. He decries ideology for manipulating people into abdicating possession of their own individual reason and

conscience to a higher power. With his paradigm of the greengrocer, Havel attempts to generate a mimetic relationship between the greengrocer and the public: If the greengrocer can acquire power through his refusal to participate in ritual and the voicing of his own truth, likewise everyone possesses the same ability. An act of refusal to participate in ritual on the part of the greengrocer could provoke a mimetic reaction throughout the society. To be politically powerful, an act need not be overtly political; power can be acquired through any form of personal expression which seeks to exist outside of myth and ritual. Accordingly, Havel concludes his explanation of the greengrocer:

> If the suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power. (43)

It was precisely this belief in the power of creative expression that came to comprise the binding philosophy of dissent in post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia. It was a fresh response to a new configuration of oppression—one that transcended literal violence and operated at the level of ideas.

Conclusion: the revolution

And when the revolution did arrive in Czechoslovakia, the crowd called not for vengeance, but rather for truth. *"Liar!"* they accused their government. *"Pravda zvítezí,"* the people shouted on Wenceslas Square. "The truth will prevail!" Their words were meaningful, expressing in effect the people's awareness that the emperor was not—and had not been for quite a long time—wearing any clothes. The onset of the revolution on November 17th, 1989 brought together a peaceful crowd and a still-violent regime. While the crowd insisted it would commit no violence, riot police brutally beat demonstrators. Yet that first day marked both the beginning of the revolution and the end of violence. Charter 77 signatory Miloslava Holubová told the story of the demonstration that took place just a few days afterwards. This time, someone spoke and informed the crowd that two of the riot police who had beaten protesters a few days earlier were once again

present. The crowd reacted spontaneously with shouts of anger. But in the next moment, the speaker told the people that the policemen wanted to ask them for forgiveness. And at once the crowd began chanting, "We are forgiving! We are forgiving!" "It was a miracle," Holubová said. "How can you explain this? Because we were so angry since that Friday . . . . "[7] In Girardian terms, this was a magical moment of the creation of a new type of mimesis and the transcendence of the sacrificial system itself.

On politics and morality

Writing about the communist era in Hungary, the historian Elemér Hankiss posits that "the dichotomy of omnipotent despot versus passive and subservient slave has been misleading ever since it was created" (2). In Czechoslovakia this latter relationship between power "from above" and the individual "from below" can be symbolized in the battle of words and thoughts, the struggle over the right to tell the story of history as it existed in both the past and present. Thus the history of Czechoslovakia during communist totalitarianism and through the Velvet Revolution provides potent testimony to the power of history and the power of ideology in its configuration as the monopolistic narrative of history. Correspondingly, the drama of a revolution propelled by intellectuals attests to the efficacy of nonviolent dissent and the power of the word to deconstruct ideology.

Yet in the long term, the answer to the question of whether it is possible to transcend Girard's dark proclamation that society exists on the foundation of sacrifice, whether it is possible for order to exist in the absence of myth will be inscripted into the narrative of history. As former dissident Jan Urban points out with obvious pain in his post-revolution essay, "The Powerlessness of the Powerful," all was not wonderful after the revolution. Many argue that the dissidents failed in politics after 1989. Historians describe postcommunist Czechoslovakia as harboring a population morally corrupted by having become accustomed to living within cognitive dissonance and harsh cleavages between truth and lies. Consensus has been that Eastern Europe is presently suspended in an ideological vacuum. More telling, perhaps, is the November 1989 scene related by British historian and chronicler of the revolution Timothy Garton Ash:

[7] Miloslava Holubová, Personal interview, 11 August 1993.

> Havel reiterates the Forum's dissatisfaction with some of the new leaders, and especially with the survival in office of the deeply unpopular Prague Party secretary, Miroslav Stepán. 'Shame! Shame!' cry the crowd. And then he says that the only person in power who had responded to the wishes of the people is the prime minister, Ladislav Adamec. 'Adamec! Adamec!' roar the crowd, *and one trembles for a moment at the ease with which they are swayed.* (1990, 100; emphasis added)

So the challenge of ruling without myth, configuring power without the scapegoating of victims, remains for the new governments in former Czechoslovakia as it does for all the new governments in Eastern Europe. And the narrative of history continues.*

*The author would especially like to thank for numerous discussions and valuable critical comments Brad Abrams, Byron Bland, Ian Bremmer, Professor Stefano Cochetti, Professor Robert Hamerton-Kelly, Professor David Holloway, and Ludmila Vítkovicková.

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