2 The Parallel '*Polis*'

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Charter 77 has at least two remarkable achievements to its credit: it has gathered together a broad spectrum of political opinion and civic attitudes; and it has managed to remain legal. It has paid for these achievements by finding itself, from the outset, in a rather schizophrenic situation. On the one hand, despite deep differences in the principles behind their criticism and even deeper ones in their notions about how change might be brought about, everyone takes a very dim view of the present political system and how it works. On the other hand, we behave as though we had failed to notice that the claims the regime makes about its own good intentions, and the laws that appear to limit its totality, are merely propagandistic camouflage. This tactic of taking the authorities at their word is, in itself, a shrewd ploy. Nevertheless, with all due respect to shrewdness, such an approach cannot bridge the gap between the positions mentioned above.

Charter 77 managed, at least temporarily and quite effectively, to eliminate this schism by stressing moral and ethical attitudes over political ones. Today this solution no longer works, and the original dilemma has returned in an even more pressing form. The reasons for this are roughly the following:

1. The death of Professor Patočka, who was unquestionably the *spiritus movens* of this solution.
2. The regime has finally realised that its virulent campaign has transformed a political problem into a moral one and that it has thus unwittingly accepted our choice of weapons. From that moment on the official media have fallen silent on the subject of the Charter, and the regime has limited itself to acts of strangulation in the dark. The official term for it is 'whittling away at the edges'.
3. The moral attitude was postulated abstractly, without raising any concrete issues or aims. An abstract moral stance, however, is merely a gesture; it may be terribly effective at the time, but it cannot be sustained for more than a few weeks or months. Proof of this is a phenomenon familiar to Charter signatories: the

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ecstatic sensation of liberation caused by signing the Charter gradually gave way to disillusionment and deep scepticism.

Without underestimating the importance of the first two points, I feel that the third is decisive, and sufficient in itself to create a problem. I am therefore suggesting a strategy that should gradually lead us out of the blind alley we are in today. This strategy can be summarised in two phrases: what unifies and drives us must continue to be a sense of *moral commitment and mission*; and this drive should be given a place and a perspective in the creation of a *parallel polis*.

The moral justification of a citizen's right and duty of a citizen to participate in the affairs of a community (affairs that are 'political' in the broadest sense of the word) is beyond all doubt. This was the source of the Charter's public mandate, and at first, it was enough to overcome the differences of opinion within the Charter. It was a guarantee of unity, tolerance, cooperation and, to a certain extent, persistence. Moreover this moral stance is so closely associated with the Charter in the eyes of the public and most of the signatories that any other formula could legitimately lay claim to continuity only with great difficulty. I am not asking, therefore, *whether* we should proceed from a moral basis, but *how* to make that aspect inspiring and mobilising once more, and how to ensure that its influence will persist. I am asking what *kind* of specific efforts or 'positive' programme can derive its energy from that morality in the future.

A citizen may certainly see there is a moral commitment involved in challenging an evil political power and trying to destroy it. Nevertheless, in the circumstances, such a commitment is suicidal, and cannot hope for public support in any rational ethical system. Likewise, a citizen may feel morally obliged to size up the situation realistically and try to bring about at least partial improvements through compromise and reform. But given the ethics of the present regime, we cannot expect that the moral motivations of such behaviour will generally be appreciated, or be in any way morally appealing.

There is a third way of ameliorating conditions in the community (*obec*). Most structures that are connected, in one way or another, with the life of the community (i.e., to political life) are either inadequate or harmful. I suggest that we join forces in creating, slowly but surely, parallel structures that are capable, to a limited degree at least, of supplementing the generally beneficial and necessary functions that are missing in the existing structures, and where possible, to use those existing structures, to humanise them.

This plan will satisfy both the 'reformists' and the 'radicals'. It need not lead to a direct conflict with the regime, yet it harbours no illusions that 'cosmetic changes' can make any difference. Moreover it leaves open the key question of the system's viability. Even if such structures were only partially successful, they would bring pressure to bear on the official structures, which would either collapse (if you accept the view of the radicals) or regenerate themselves in a useful way (if you accept the reformist position).

Both wings will object because this plan reeks of the movement to 'enlighten the masses' and it is politically naive. Yet here we all are in the Charter, and the Charter is an undeniably naive act, politically speaking, as are all attempts to base one's actions on morality. In any case my suggestion comes directly from the present form of Charter 77, which grew out of actions taken to defend parallel structures that already existed (the Second Culture), and which devotes much of its efforts to 'humanising' existing official structures (like the legislative system) by reinterpreting their meaning. Official politicians should recall that it was they, in the end, who brought the community to its present state and that the decent thing to do would be to rethink either their political beliefs, or their notion of what is and what is not politically naive. There is no third way.

Perhaps it is beyond our powers to implement this plan. Nevertheless it is realistic in the sense that it has already worked. Here are two examples that are at once remarkable, and yet very different. Parallel cultural structures today undeniably exist, and they are a positive phenomenon. In some areas, like literature, and to some extent in popular music and the plastic arts, the parallel culture overshadows the lifeless, official culture. A phenomenon just as undeniable (and negative, though more functional and more human) is the parallel economy, based on systematic theft, corruption and 'favours'. Under the shiny surface of official economics this parallel economy is a factor in most consumer relations, and also in industrial and trade relations as well.

Here, in brief and in no particular order, are the details of my plan:

(a) This point is the preamble to all the others. Our legal system is one of the worst in the world, because it exists solely for propagandistic purposes and for that reason is extremely vague and completely lacking in any legal guarantees. At the same time, and for the very same reasons, this allows it to be interpreted in a very liberal way. We must systematically exploit this discrepancy, and we must be prepared at any time for it to be used systemati-

cally against us. The transition from a totalitarian to a liberal system would mean a transition from the principle of 'whatever is not expressly permitted is forbidden' to the principle of 'whatever is not expressly forbidden is permitted'. This can be accomplished only by continually testing the limits of what is permitted, and by occupying the newly won positions with great energy.

(b) So far, the Second Culture is the most developed and dynamic parallel structure. It should serve as a model for other areas and, at the same time, all available means must be deployed to support its development, especially in neglected areas like literary criticism, cultural journalism, theatre and film.

(c) A parallel structure of education and scientific and scholarly life has already established a certain tradition, although in the past two years it has tended to stagnate. I consider the organisation of a parallel educational system to be of utmost importance, both for personal reasons (I cannot harbour too many illusions about the chances of my children getting an official education) and for more general reasons. The 'underground', which is by far the most numerous element in the Charter, has been able to overcome sectarianism and become political; but if this change is to last, we will clearly have to do 'educational' work in these circles. I feel that here in particular there is room for us to aim high with a 'maximalist' programme.

(d) In its early stages the Charter was able to create a parallel information network that was functional and prompt and involved at least several tens of thousands of people. The gradual degeneration of that network, which unfortunately occurred faster than could be explained by the waning of the Charter's initial sensational impact, is considered one of the greatest failures of the Charter and one of the most critical symptoms, so far, of a crisis in its development.

The most important materials from Charter 77 were disseminated by direct, internal circulation (i.e., not via foreign radio broadcasts) to an estimated tens of thousands or even, in the case of the original declaration, to several hundred thousand people. Recently the number of those receiving Charter material has shrunk to hundreds, or at best to some thousands of citizens.

The contents and form of the information circulated will obviously be of key significance. The circulation of information must be considered as important as the actual preparation of the

material. Everyone who complains today about the lack of information should feel obliged to circulate the information they do receive more effectively.

The informational network so created must be used regularly. Long periods of inactivity are more dangerous than overloading it, because this leads to loss of interest and the stagnation of connections already established.

Close to the sources, effectiveness is more important than politeness. It is essential to pass information on to places where its further dissemination is assured. I would rather see some 'prominent' person informed of something second hand than have the flow of information clogged, thus limiting it to a narrow circle of people.

There is an urgent need to improve the flow of information to groups outside Prague. It is even more urgent for these groups to establish mutual connections and create autonomous information networks of their own. Here, too, the most important factor in deciding who shall be given the information is whether or not that person can type.

In the future, we will have to consider using other means of reproduction besides the typewriter. A thorough analysis of the legal aspects of this problem should be prepared, and the possibilities of using such technologies as photocopying should be explored.

At the moment, the tasks facing us in the parallel economy are unimaginable, but though our opportunities are limited, the need to exploit them is urgent. The regime treats the economy as a key means of arbitrarily manipulating citizens and, at the same time, it regulates it as strictly as possible. We therefore have to rely on strictly confidential accounting practices (any other kind would cross the line into illegal activity), and we must develop a wide base for charitable and other support activities. Our community ought to be based on a system of mutual guarantees that are both moral and material. To demonstrate the morality and disinterestedness of our own motives by ostentatiously ignoring material factors is, in such circumstances, just as naive and dangerous as informing the State Security forces about the details of our lives because we consider what we do to be honest and legal. We must resist this pressure by consistently turning to international solidarity for help, starting with support from individuals and organisations and ending with far more effective forms of scientific and

cultural cooperation that would assure our relative independence from official economic structures (i.e., honoraria for works of art or scientific articles, stipends, etc.).

(f) The ground must be prepared for the creation and encouragement of parallel political (in the narrow sense of the word) structures. This would include a wide range of activities, from raising people's awareness of their civic responsibilities, to creating the proper conditions for political discussion and the formulation of theoretical points of view. It would also include support for concrete political currents and groupings.

As regards a parallel foreign policy, my premise is that the internationalisation of any problem, though it may stand little chance of success, can do no harm. Some of the parallel structures I have mentioned here, in economics and education, for instance, cannot hope to function, in the beginning at least, without support from abroad. Publicity for our efforts will provide protection against arbitrary actions by the regime and, for the majority of citizens, it is also the main source of information (foreign radio and TV).

No less important is mutual cooperation between related trends in other East Bloc countries. In decades past almost every country in that bloc has paid dearly for the lack of such cooperation. At the moment publicity for what we are doing is quite insignificant and our cooperation with parallel movements inside the bloc has always been painfully inadequate. We must immediately create a team to investigate the reasons for such inadequacies and propose specific remedies.

The individual parallel structures will be connected with the Charter in varying degrees. Some will become an integral part of it; others will be midwived and wetnursed by the Charter; yet others the Charter will provide with a guarantee of legality. The parallel structures so formed will go beyond the framework of the Charter in various ways and sooner or later they must become autonomous, not only because they don't fit into the Charter's original form and mission, but because were they not to become autonomous, we would be building a ghetto rather than a parallel *polis*.

Even so, the Charter ought not to limit its involvement in such initiatives in any fundamental way, for by doing so, it would shift its focus from civic activity to merely monitoring such activity, and it would thus lose most of its moral energy. For the future,

we will have to accept the fact that we will probably find it easier to agree on a common starting point for our efforts than on any external limitations to them. A citizens' initiative like the Charter will inevitably overflow into related initiatives and, because it is a free association, it has no means authoritatively to establish its own limits. The Charter was, is, and will continue to be based on the confidence that individual groups of signatories will responsibly avoid actions unacceptable to other groups, or that would undermine the original unity and solidarity in the Charter.

Charter 77 must continue to fulfil its proper purpose, namely to compile basic documents which draw attention to denial of human rights and suggest ways of correcting the situation. Documents should appear at the very least at two-month intervals. They ought to be addressed not only to the authorities, but also – and above all – to our fellow citizens. They should therefore deal with genuinely urgent problems. They should not be inordinately long and they should be sufficiently comprehensible even for a lay public, avoiding legal or specialist jargon.

If our aim is to combat the general feeling of futility and hopelessness, rather than contributing to it, we must try to learn from our failure to hold a dialogue with the regime. That means going even further. There is nothing to stop us from presenting, in addition to our usual demands for institutional change, proposals for parallel civic activities that would enable improvements to be made in the given state of affairs. If producing documents ceases to be the sole aim and comes to be considered as merely one aspect of a more persistent effort to investigate the causes of the our present misery and to suggest ways of rectification, the Charter 77 is really in no danger of degenerating and becoming a mere producer of dry, rustling papers. Such an approach would represent the most natural transition to the plan, here presented, to create a parallel *polis*.

NOTE

1. Originally in *samizdat*, May 1978, given also in *O svobodě a moci* (Cologne, 1987).