

Civil Society and Art/Theory Producers as Parallel Polis? Reflections on the Challenges of Dissident Culture from 1968 to 1989 and Beyond

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The article deals with Czechoslovak dissident culture after 1968, in particular with the movement Charter 77 and its legacy after 1989, focusing on the concept of paralelní polis (parallel polis) introduced by Václav Benda and widely discussed among dissidents: the idea of creating new and independent cultural, economic, and media structures parallel to the official structures. The study considers the paralelní polis as an instrument through which the (post-)’68-movements led by intellectuals, artists, and theorists sought the emancipation and diversification of civil society in both capitalist and socialist countries. With the collapse of the socialist world after 1989, the history of the paralelní polis reveals that the ’68 idea of civil society was ambivalent, while Charter 77 proved to be a heterogeneous movement. Many ex-Chartists came to believe that capitalism could better enable the existence of a civil society than socialism, while others did not accept this view. Moreover, even among the supporters of capitalism there was no unity (some were close to neoliberalism, others were critical of it). In contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, there was no dialogue between these different positions within civil society, but rather radicalization and exclusivity. The radical left, anarcho-capitalism, and Christian fundamentalism developed their particular and mutually exclusive narratives about the legacy of paralelní polis.

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Ideas of civil society from 1968 to 2019 (through 1978 and 1989)

My essay examines the relationship between 1968 and 1989 through the history of the *paralelní polis* (parallel polis), a concept that Czechoslovak dissidents of the movement Charter 77 proposed and widely discussed at the end of the 1970s (the Grecism *polis* alludes to the meaning of *πόλις* in old Greek: a state or society characterized by a sense of community). In 1978, Václav Benda, Czech dissident, Christian philosopher, and mathematician, was the first to introduce and define the idea:

Most structures that are important, in one way or another, to the life of the community (i.e., to political life) are either inadequate or harmful. I suggest that we join forces in order to gradually create parallel structures that are capable, to a limited degree at least, of supplementing the lack of generally beneficial and necessary functions, and where possible, to use the existing structures and humanize them (Benda, “The Parallel” 36).¹

In my opinion, the concept of *paralelní polis* is very relevant to the problem of continuities and discontinuities between '68 and '89, which was discussed at the Ljubljana conference in November 2019.

First, the idea of *paralelní polis* focuses on the role of civil society in the sense of a politically conscious social body that actively defines its rights and duties within a given social system. In view of the fact that, according to Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein, the years '68 and '89 marked two major anti-systemic movements, civil society proves to be one of the agencies that pose the question of whether the system is even entitled to define people's rights and duties (according to Benda, for example, the system is “inadequate or harmful” and inhumane).

Secondly, the concept of *paralelní polis* has a specific sociological framework: it was elaborated and discussed within the dissident group of Charter 77, composed of artists (especially writers), intellectuals, and theorists from various disciplines. The *paralelní polis* is thus relevant to the relationship between politics, art, and theory in the years '68 and '89—another issue that was the focus of the conference.

¹ “Většina struktur, vážících se tak či onak k životu obce (tj. životu politickému) funguje buď zcela nedostatečně, nebo dokonce škodlivě. Navrhují proto, abychom se spojili v úsilí o postupné vytvoření paralelních struktur, schopných alespoň v omezené míře suplovat chybějící obecně prospěšné a nezbytné funkce; tam kde to jde, je třeba využít i existujících struktur a ‘humanizovat’ je” (Benda, “Paralelní” 16).

Thirdly, the concept of *paralelní polis* appeared in 1978, halfway between 1968 and 1989, and this middle position is significant because the concept is rooted in the cultural practices of the 1960s, which culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968; the idea of *paralelní polis*, however, only developed in the following decades, in the period of so-called *normalizace* (normalization). For this reason, the genealogy of the concept may help to answer the question raised by the November conference of “how the conjuncture of 1968, whose struggle to transform the world seemed to have failed, led to that of 1989, which transformed the world by announcing the end of the utopia that had inspired 1968” (Habjan and Juvan 39).

Fourthly, the concept seems to be experiencing a kind of renaissance or afterlife in recent years, not only in Czech Republic, but also abroad, especially in the USA. This circumstance underlines the contingency of any contemporary research on '68 and '89: if you ask about it in 2020, you have to ask yourself what the consequences of this transition will be for the present.²

Among the working hypotheses of the November conference in Ljubljana, I would like to conclude my introductory thoughts with a qualification of the organizers' assertion—based on Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein—that both '68 and '89 are anti-systemic phenomena, while they differ in their tendency to change the system. Whereas '68 supposedly tended towards internationalist anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, secularization, social equality, and a transformative leftist utopia, '89 opted for nationalism, anti-communism, fundamentalism, corporatism (group identities), and globalist neoliberalism. The protagonists of the first event were rebellious students and intellectuals;

² I do not deal in the present essay with the Slovak contribution to the Czechoslovak dissent and do not take into examination its afterlife outside the Czech Republic either. Considerations on the reception of *paralelní polis* in the USA can be found in the work I have developed from 2017 to 2019 together with my colleagues of the cultural initiative *Literami* in the framework of an international project launched on the occasion of the Leipzig Book Fair 2019, with the Czech Republic as a guest country (see the project webpage: <https://www.pöge-haus.de/de/projekte/literami/>). *Literami* cooperated with the Belgrade review *Beton International* asking scholars and writers from East-Central Europe (including the Balkans) to comment on Benda's short text on *paralelní polis* as a possible model of the present-day civil society. We wanted to learn whether our respondents believed that parallel structures to the institutional powers persist in Europe after the Cold War and what would be their functions. The answers we got to our call (many of them in the form of fiction) were published in the German issue of *Beton International* 2019 (see the introduction to the review Colombi et. al., “Über dieses Heft” 1–5).

the second event was led by dissident elites (who also co-opted some former student rebels and '68 intellectuals), who mutated into a class of new national leaders after 1989. I agree in principle with this schematization, but it needs further clarification.

The problem is not so much related to the year '68. In my opinion, as Arrighi and colleagues suggest, it is possible to recognize similar characteristics of the '68 protests in capitalism and socialism, such as anti-imperialism and leftism (even if in the East, Soviet Union was the target of anti-imperialist criticism rather than the USA, while it was expected that socialism would become more functional and approach the transformative leftist utopias). It is rather the description of '89 as nationalist, anti-communist, fundamentalist, corporative, and neoliberal that needs clarification in view of the disintegrating socialist world. Such a characterization correctly emphasizes the outcome of '89 in the longer term, but it seems to neglect the fact that, at the beginning of the upheaval of '89 (similar to the situation in the first half of the nineteenth century), the concept of nationalism itself was understood as liberal in the classical sense of the word—that is, as an attitude that respects differences in thought and behavior, or, in today's vocabulary, as an approach that promotes emancipatory diversity. Liberal nationalism, as defined above, sought collaboration with the capitalist world in its struggle against Soviet imperialism in 1989, believing that capitalism was better suited to create a liberal, emancipated, and diverse society than socialism. The idea of liberal and international nationalism was initially widespread in the post-socialist countries. It represents a strong link to '68, because both historical events tried to affirm emancipatory diversity. The majority of the '68 protagonists would probably have accepted to be defined as liberal because of their support of emancipatory diversity. On the other hand, however, the history of liberalism combines such a cultural attitude with a belief in the promise of capitalism. As a result, many former 68ers tend to avoid the term liberal, since they are critical of capitalist consumerism (although they do not always reject capitalism as such).³ It is therefore crucial to keep the balance when talking about analogies and discrepancies between '68 and

³ For the sake of analysis, it would be useful to distinguish between *liberalism/liberal* as a cultural (and politically oriented) orientation towards emancipatory diversity in society (that is a society allowing individual and collective freedom and rights) and *liberism/liberist* as an economical (and politically oriented) view based on the ideas of capitalism and free trade (and not necessarily linking these economical principle with the pursuit of freedom and rights). Such a distinction is common, for example, in the Italian language (*liberalismolliberale* and *liberismolliberista*).

'89. From the specific post-Yugoslav point of view, as expressed in the call for papers for the Ljubljana conference, it is understandable that the relationships between nationalism, anti-communism, and global neoliberalism are also recalled in view of fundamentalism and corporatism: in the post-Yugoslav space, the critical nexus of these phenomena surfaced very soon after 1989. It is thus reasonable to ask the question whether nationalism and capitalism can legitimately be regarded as the right paths to a liberal, diverse, and emancipated society. Not only the history of the ex-Yugoslav region but also the world history of the last thirty years (including the post-socialist countries) shows that nationalism and capitalism have adopted a profile that is clearly not emancipatory and liberal: their fundamentalism considers the other as the enemy, while their neoliberalism constrains all those who are deprived of leadership in the deregulated market.

Nevertheless, we should remember that the idea of a new national and capitalist society in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and Czech Republic of the 1990s was linked to the '68 idea of a liberal, emancipatory, and diverse society. Consequently, further discussion is needed to find out whether the inclination towards capitalism in '89 also implies a general belief in neoliberalism, or whether Czechoslovakians and other citizens of the socialist world at that time already properly understood this new form of capitalism (see Ther). For it was only gradually, especially after 2000, that the desire for emancipatory diversity in Czech society began to fade. This is remarkable in that Czechoslovakia in '89 seems to be Janus-faced: it looked back on the '68 struggle for emancipatory diversity, while also looking to the future, with its homogenizing agenda of neoliberalism and fundamentalism.⁴

⁴ It would be all the more interesting to compare the case of Czechoslovakia and its aftermath with the case of Yugoslavia, since the latter is revealing not only because anti-liberal features of nationalism appeared here earlier and clearer as elsewhere, but also because of the Yugoslav form of socialism, the so-called *samoupravljanje* (self-management). Through the ideology of self-management, the authorities seemed to support, at least in theory, the active role of civil society—seemingly in line with the demands of '68 movements. The question remains open of whether *paralelní polis*—as a concept promoted by dissidents—took root in the official Yugoslav policy to support and, at the same time, contain civil society. Another topic of interest would be the afterlife of *samoupravljanje*. For this, see Blažič 13–14.

***Paralelní polis*—an ambivalent concept for heterogeneous dissidents**

To understand the concept of *paralelní polis* correctly, one must focus on the social setting in which it was produced, that is, the dissident movement Charter 77. It began in 1977 as an informal civil initiative of a small dissident circle around the playwright Václav Havel. After having recovered from the years of repression, Czechoslovak dissidents wrote the Charter to criticize the government because it failed to implement human rights provisions of a number of documents to which it had signed, including the Final Act of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. The initiative took the name of its first document protesting against the imprisonment of nonconformist musicians (including members of the band Plastic People of the Universe, a symbol of Czechoslovak dissent). Initially, 250 people signed the Charter; by 1989, the number of signatories had risen to around two thousand.

Charter 77 represents an original experiment in the history of Czechoslovak dissent after the beginning of socialist rule in 1948. Under the same banner, it unites three different groups of dissidents: firstly, the advocates of liberal democracy in the sense of emancipatory diversity and the capitalist welfare state (Havel and others); secondly, socialist reformers and other leftist activists who imagined liberalism as a system of emancipatory diversity to be achieved by revisionist socialism or anarchy, but not by capitalism; thirdly, the adherents of underground culture who claimed to be apolitical (i.e., they did not propose a change of system, but pleaded to ignore the system and live their lives autonomously). Similar to the ideas of the American beat generation, they mixed socialist, anarchist, and finally capitalist ideas and attitudes. The dissidents of Charter 77 thus formed a heterogeneous movement based on a single common denominator—the rejection of the existing socialist system. However, their heterogeneity does not prevent Charter 77 from agreeing on a shared and innovative political strategy. It is not about rebellion, reformation, or indifference, but about “taking the authorities at their word” as Benda points out (Benda, “The Parallel” 35)⁵—and thus reminding the state to follow its rules and regulations.

The development of such a strategy of cooperation between groups that had not usually worked together before was very complex and cannot be analyzed in detail here. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Havel played the integrative role in this process: he had a sense for

⁵ “vzetí [politické moci] za slovo” (Benda, “Paralelní” 15).

bringing together different groups based on a common dissatisfaction with the suppression of Prague Spring; furthermore, he justified the new strategy of dissent with the argument of emancipatory diversity (although he did not use this word) and the need for a diverse civil society in Czechoslovakia.⁶

Even though Charter 77, with its signatories, is a predominantly intellectual initiative of a limited number of supporters (and sympathizers beyond intellectual circles), the government reacted harshly against it, while it became known in the West. The support from abroad, together with adequate education and various cultural skills of the signatories, led to many of them (e. g., Havel and Benda) eventually taking on key political roles during the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and in the post-socialist period. This circumstance and the Charter celebrations in the 1990s gave the impression that the movement was compact, while its political heterogeneity was almost forgotten (Bolton 276; Colombi et al., “Über dieses Heft” 4). This diversity, however, is not only crucial for the Charter’s activities, but also for understanding Benda’s concept of *paralelní polis*.

The idea of creating parallel social structures that humanize and complement the missing functions of the existing structures represents a work program that the various factions of Charter 77 have been able to agree on, despite their political differences. Benda proposes a concrete and pragmatic goal for activities in the fields of culture, education and science, communication and information, economy, and national and international support for Czechoslovak dissidents. According to Benda, something similar to *paralelní polis* already exists in the area of culture (mostly in the organization of musical and literary events), which deserves to be extended to “neglected areas like literary criticism, cultural journalism, theatre and film” (Benda, “The Parallel” 38).⁷ Benda also recalls parallel educational initiatives (probably private lectures and courses given by dissidents) and characterizes the typewritten *samizdat* literature as communicational *paralelní polis*. He pleads for more efforts in both areas, stressing the need for some kind of shared economy among dissidents as well as financial and political support

⁶ Havel’s central role in orchestrating the allegiance between the different components of Charter 77 is among Bolton’s main theses (Bolton 134–139). Bolton characterizes Havel’s integrative conception of the Charter 77 “as a moral initiative, more than a political-civic one”. Havel fashions the Charter’s demand of a diverse civil society as the expression of a compelling moral need.

⁷ “zanedban[é] oblast[i] (literární kritika a kulturní publicistika vůbec, divadlo, film)” (Benda, “Paralelní” 17).

from abroad. Benda probably overlooks specific dissident initiatives; for example, underground cultural events in the 1970s (and later) are not only musical and literary in nature, but can be understood in a broad sense as performative, as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* that includes theatrical and cinematographic elements. Essential, however, is Benda's striving for further diversification and implementation of the already existing parallel poleis (including those he does not notice) with the intention of creating "a critical, solidary, and independent civil society outside the socialist institutions" (Colombi et al., "*Paralelni polis*" 21).⁸

Benda's concept of *paralelni polis* certainly provides a common basis for Charter 77, but it is rather vague and general. It does not take into account the theoretical and practical dilemma of bringing the *paralelni polis* to life, as different dissident groups of the Charter 77 movement could use divergent strategies to establish their own parallel structures. In his proposal Benda

refuses to specify the nature of the relationship between the counter-systemic structures and society as a whole. Are they supposed to simply coexist or, quite to the contrary, deliberately intersect? It seems as if subversion was an integral part of the *paralelni polis*, but to what extent? And up to which degree is the parallel polis supposed to cooperate with official and governmental institutions, and when should it prefer confrontation? At which point might it be more favorable to retract? And what about the creation of competing or even conflicting parallel poleis? (Colombi et al., "*Paralelni polis*" 21)

Benda's text hints at both confrontation and cooperation with the system, while at the same time conceding a retreat. The openness of Benda's argument can be seen as part of the Charter's strategy, which provides for more flexible modes of struggle against the system that go beyond the alternative of revolution or reformation and complete indifference. It is nevertheless significant that Benda does not disclose the problems that could arise in trying to reconcile different strategies and orientations of the Charter 77 factions. Instead, he seems to believe that the heterogeneous components of the movement would find common ground for their interaction in the process of building their *paralelni polis*.

To conclude: the openness of Benda's concept and the ambivalence of its possible outcomes stem from the political heterogeneity of Charter 77. In order to accounting for this heterogeneity, the concept of *paralelni polis* aims to provide a common basis for the members of

⁸ On the aesthetics of underground, see Machovec; Kliems; Pilač.

the Charter while respecting internal differences. However, the common ground proved to be more inspiring than practical. The history of the *paralelní polis* and its afterlife will show that internal differences are not so easy to overcome.

***Paralelní polis*—from hippies to anarcho-capitalists and Christian radicals**

The first three of the five areas of *paralelní polis* that Benda mentions are dedicated to culture *in parte* or *toto*, what testifies to the importance of art and theory for his concept. It is no coincidence that Benda refers to the existing *paralelní polis* of music and literature. These milieus of dissident culture seem to him to be the most established examples of how a parallel structure works in actual practice. Admittedly, there were also other unofficial cultural initiatives in the Charter movement, but they were mostly limited to small intellectual groups, mainly from older generations. Underground culture, on the other hand, attracted broader groups with its rock genres and later with punk; with their Western origin, both had a strong appeal on the younger generation, not least because they were linked to party culture.⁹ The connection between Charter 77 and the underground of the younger generation is of crucial importance because a part of this generation, which grew up in the 1960s, adopted the ideas of Prague Spring in 1968. At that time, youngsters were allowed to organize musical and party events (although they occasionally had to cover up and soften the most provocative traits of Western-oriented youth culture). It was therefore difficult for them to bear the repressive measures of the regime in the 1970s, especially since they perhaps had only vague memories of Stalinism from their childhood. Because underground concerts and parties attracted more audiences than any other unofficial event, they acted as a catalyst for other cultural and art practices, including literature.

The writer and philosopher Egon Bondy is a good example of the interaction between the arts of the underground. He belonged to the older generation and was a protagonist of the so-called proto-underground of the late 1940s and 1950s, mainly a literary and visual art phenomenon that took up the legacy of the interwar avant-gardes, such

⁹ The link between music, new generation and alternative protest culture around 1968 is therefore present in Czechoslovakia as well as in the capitalist world (for the latter, see Siegfried).

as surrealism, and mixed it with existentialism (its members were all oppressed by state socialism and its aesthetics of socialist realism; see Zand). Bondy's proto-underground resembles the post-1968 underground, such as the band The Plastic People of the Universe, in that it avoided confrontation with the regime and sought to exist alongside it, but its dissent was limited to smaller parallel structures of intellectuals. It was only Bondy's encounter with the underground of the new generation that changed the form and aims of his art: he began to address a broader and younger audience. He began writing lyrics for The Plastic People of the Universe and published a utopian-dystopian science fiction novel entitled *Invalidní sourozenci* (The Invalid Siblings, 1974). The novel figures as a kind of allegory of underground life in Czechoslovakia after 1968, describing a futuristic hippie community that—enjoying do-it-yourself concerts, art exhibitions, parties, and narcotic experiences—lives on an island divided between two states ruled by authoritarian regimes. The two states are at war, but their social systems tolerate hippies and provide them with the necessities of life and try to contain their politicization. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bondy's novel seemed to have offered the underground a kind of convincing identification narrative; the author once read it successfully in public (Bolton 124–127). Indeed, the ambivalent attitude that the hippies portrayed in *Invalidní sourozenci* have towards state authorities is reminiscent of the specific apolitical position of the underground dissenters who live separately from society and at the same time off society.¹⁰

In a certain way, *Invalidní sourozenci* illustrates Benda's ambivalent attitude towards underground culture. In his view, “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 has to last, we will clearly have to do ‘educational’ work in this circle” (Benda, “The Parallel” 38).¹¹ The quotation refers to the tensions between the heterogeneous groups of Charter 77; Benda implicitly (and somehow paternalistically) suggests that while underground art and culture are an operational parallel structure, they still need to be instructed about political practice and theory. The tension between Benda and the underground is emblematic of the dissident debates in

¹⁰ I thank Mike Hummel for sharing with me his interesting insights on Bondy's *Invalidní sourozenci*.

¹¹ “underground, který je daleko nejpočetnější složkou v Chartě, se dokázal zpolitizovat a překonat své setkářství, nicméně trvalost takového výsledku je zřejmě podmíněná našimi možnostmi ‘osvětářského’ působení v těchto kruzích” (Benda, “Paralelní” 17).

the 1980s about how a parallel civil society should be conceived. Until 1989, Charter 77 provided a common platform for debates between various dissenting groups.¹² Moreover, the exchange of views did not lead to serious conflicts, as dissidents postponed the question of how to cooperate after the hypothetical fall of the regime.

For instance, Havel's famous essay *Moc bezmocných* (The Power of the Powerless), written shortly after Benda's 1978 text on *paralelní polis*, defines life under the socialist regime as inauthentic. For Havel, dissent means an "independent life of a society" that fights for a "truthful life (that is, the defense of human rights and the struggle to see the laws respected)." He associates his vision of civil society with the idea of *paralelní polis*:

In other words, are not these informal, nonbureaucratic, dynamic, and open communities that comprise the 'parallel polis' a kind of rudimentary prefiguration, a symbolic model of those more meaningful 'post-democratic' political structures that might become the foundation of a better society? (Havel, "Power" 395, 407)¹³

It is not clear what a post-democracy should be in Havel's view. While it undoubtedly supersedes "people's democracy" of the existing regime, it also seems to overcome the liberal democracy of the capitalist world, as Havel criticizes it in part for its consumerism and lack of civil commitment. Is it possible that in *The Power of the Powerless* Havel still alludes to some form of direct democracy, even though he rejected this idea after his election as president? One is tempted to assume that Havel wants to suspend the question of the character of *paralelní polis* in the post-democratic period until the beginning of this period.

The event of '89 fundamentally changed the debates on civil society among former dissidents, due to two major changes: firstly, after the fall of the socialist regime, various groups of former dissidents lost their common target; secondly, the debates shifted from the non-institutional to the institutional level, leading to a radicalization of positions and the consequent difficulty of negotiating them. This situation characterizes the afterlife of *paralelní polis* in the 1990s and 2000s, not only in Czech Republic, but also abroad (e.g., in the United States, where

¹² On different views on the *paralelní polis*, see Skillig and Wilson.

¹³ "Jinými slovy: nejsou tato neformální, nebyrokratická, dynamická a otevřená společenství—celá tato 'paralelní polis' jakýmsi zárodečným předobrazem či symbolickým mikromodelem oněch smysluplnějších 'post-demokratických' politických struktur, které by mohly zakládat lepší uspořádání společnosti?" (Havel, *Moc* 55).

the concept was first adopted and then radicalized in various directions that did not communicate with each other).

To begin with, the first remarkable episode of the afterlife of *paralelní polis* in Czech Republic was the conversion of Benda into a right-wing conservative politician and resolute anti-communist. He became the director of the *Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunistu* (Office for the Documentation and Prosecution of Communist Crimes), the institution founded after 1989 with the task of investigating and punishing the crimes committed by the Czechoslovak communist regime. Admittedly, Benda was never friendly towards the regime (see his text on *paralelní polis*), but in the 1980s he collaborated with leftist dissidents from the Charter 77 circle. In the 1990s, however, Benda stopped discriminating between Stalinist supporters of *normalizace* and socialist reformists as well as other leftist activists. Now he regarded all of them as agents of totalitarian thinking, while admiring Augusto Pinochet, a right-wing dictator hostile to any idea of an emancipatory and diverse civil society.¹⁴

Another and particularly interesting moment in the afterlife of the *paralelní polis* occurred in Prague in 2014 when the performers of the anarcho-capitalist group Ztohoven opened a cultural center and a hacker's room called Paralelní Polis, where it is said that only Bitcoins can be used. The center is the seat of the *Institut kryptoanarchie* (Institute of Cryptoanarchy), which disseminates the ideas of Timothy C. May's 1992 *Crypto Anarchist Manifesto*. In line with cryptoanarchy, Ztohoven advocates absolute disbelief in state authority¹⁵ and the right of every individual to unlimited free trade in all areas of life—a credo that is not only pro-capitalist but also sympathetic to neoliberalism (the latter still acknowledges states as economic players, whereas Ztohoven radically subverts their authority). Ztohoven's interpretation of the concept of *paralelní polis* declines from Benda's notion in the 1990s: it is against nationalism and fundamentalism, but radicalizes neoliberalism by linking it to the anarchic tradition that was dear to '68. The convergence of these seemingly contradictory visions

¹⁴ On Benda's evolution after '89, see Kopeček (on Benda's anti-communism) and Sikora (on his admiration of Pinochet). Benda's biography seems to confirm one of the working hypotheses of the Ljubljana conference: after '89, the former protagonists of '68 turned into a new ruling élite, increasingly nationalist and fundamentalist (Benda's fundamentalism is Christian).

¹⁵ "States and their security agencies globally control access to information and use the protection of intellectual property as an excuse to apply total censorship to control the available resources" (*Paralelní polis*).

was observed by Czech leftist culture. In reaction to the opening of Ztohoven's center, the cultural magazine *A2* published two articles. The art historian Milena Bartlová writes:

Is it really the case that forty years ago the thinkers of Czech dissent prepared the conceptual background of post-democratic neoliberalism? I suspect that Ztohoven only informed itself very superficially. In fact, when we read Benda's original texts, we can clearly see that his main interest is neither ever-increasing wealth nor individual freedom, which is not concerned with the consequences of its actions, but with the human being. [...] The Chartists' *paralelní polis* was an idealistic project of "life in truth" for those who are marginalized and do not have the strength to impose ideas of a good life for the whole of society against the authoritarian power. [...] Ztohoven as a project is exactly the opposite in its libertarianism. [...] Frankly, it is not interested only in socially disadvantaged people, but neither in the real world in general.¹⁶ (Bartlová)

Bartlová points out that Ztohoven did not hesitate to collect money from neoliberal entrepreneurs in order to build its cultural center and concludes by lamenting the threat of misinterpretations of the dissident legacy (as committed by Ztohoven) at a time when both the official left (with few exceptions) and the radical left seem to have forgotten it. Bartlová's final remark somehow hit the mark when compared to another *A2* article about Ztohoven. Lukáš Rychetský, one of the founders of the magazine, shares Bartlová's opinion that Ztohoven and anarchocapitalism in general are but expressions of the dominant neoliberal culture. As a counter-example, he cites the Prague squat *Klinika*, an alternative cultural and social center, but does not claim for it the legacy of Benda's *paralelní polis*. For Rychetský, this concept was from the beginning only a "part of the ghettoization of Charter 77" (Rychetský).¹⁷ After all, he appreciates *Klinika* because it "from the

¹⁶ "Je tomu opravdu tak, že myslitelé českého disentu před čtyřiceti lety připravovali ideové zázemí postdemokratického neoliberalismu? Mám podezření, že Ztohoven se informovali jen dost povrchně. Čtemeli totiž původní Bendovy texty, jasně vidíme, že tím, o co mu vždy jde především, není stále větší a větší bohatství ani individuální svoboda, která se neohlíží na důsledky svých činů, ale člověk. [...] Chartistická paralelní polis byla idealistickým projektem "života v pravdě" pro ty, kdo jsou vytlačeni na okraj a nemají sílu proti autoritářské moci prosadit ideje dobrého života pro celou společnost. [...] Projekt Ztohoven je ve svém libertariánství pravým opakem. [...] Upřímně je nezajímají nejen sociálně neprivilegovaní lidé, ale vůbec reálný svět."

¹⁷ "součástí ghettoizace Charty 77". Since Rychetský does not explain his statement, it remains unclear whether he criticizes Charter 77 for its cautious attitude towards the official culture and mainstream society during the *normalizace* period or he rather suggests that *paralelní polis* was indeed a proper strategy in the context

beginning was able to create the impression of open doors that lead not only to internal exile and the fetishization of the potentiality of subcultures” (Rychetský).¹⁸

’68/’89 and the challenge of diversity

In conclusion, I recapitulate the analysis of the concept of *paralelní polis* and its history by pointing out how it contributes to the understanding of the historical process between 1968 and 1989. The call to the Ljubljana conference defines ’68 as a modern historical event, while it considers ’89 as postmodern, thus suggesting that art and theory produced in the spheres of these events have a modern or postmodern character. I agree in principle with this thesis, but I would like to clarify and relativize it by referring to Peter V. Zima’s understanding of modernity and postmodernity. From the point of view of the history of mentality, he characterizes modernity as an attitude that highlights contradictions of the world and society in order to search for general, monocentric, systemic, and emancipatory solutions. According to Zima, modernity has the ability to question the general solutions it is looking for, even if it cannot do without the horizon of universal utopia—that is, the vision of total emancipation of all humanity from the contradictions of the world. Conversely, according to Zima, postmodernity is an attitude that is no less aware of the contradictions, but does not aspire to a universal utopia. Instead, postmodernity seeks particular, situational solutions and rejects general recipes as constraining master narratives (Zima, *Komparativistik* 262–284; *Moderne/Postmoderne*). Although the complete absence of utopia in postmodernity is debatable, I agree with the assertion that postmodern particular, situational solutions can have the character of local utopias, such as the ideal horizons of the nationalisms, fundamentalisms, and corporatisms that conquer the globe after ’89.¹⁹ But the idea of neoliberalism is more complicated: its promises

in which alternative movements could only proceed as self-contained experiments, whereas post-’89 civil society needs more open challenges.

¹⁸ “hned od počátku dokázala nabídnout dojem otevřených dveří, které nevedou jen do vnitřního exilu a k fetišizaci subkulturního potenciálu”. For a criticism of Ztohoven’s *Paralelní Polis*, see Slačálek 5. The Klinika center was evicted in 2019.

¹⁹ In this respect, my position differs from Zima’s because he considers postmodern skepticism about master narratives as an outcome of postmodern indifference towards the utopian. Given that utopia is ideal condition for total emancipation from the contradictions of the real, it remains open whether utopia necessarily concerns

could be seen as a universal utopia for the good of the whole world, i.e., as a product of modernity. On the other hand, I also accept the argument that the essential neoliberal tenet, i.e., the deregulation of the economy according to specific local conditions, can be considered postmodern because it rejects a centralist control system (although the World Bank seems to have this function).

In my view, the categories of modernity and postmodernity are relevant to the issue of both continuity and discontinuity between '68 and '89 (see again Arrighi's, Hopkins', and Wallerstein's claim that both events are anti-systemic). Most important, however, is the dissimilarity between '68 and '89 in their respective struggles for political emancipation and social diversity. Indeed, '68 proves to be a modern event because it strives for a universal (leftist) utopia. On the other hand, the New Left of that period rejected all centralist solutions imposed by the dominant institutions in both the capitalist and socialist world. Instead, the activists of '68 demanded political participation of the whole of society at the grassroots level, that is, they wanted society to become a civil society. Despite their awareness of the inevitable diversity of civil society, they believed in the possibility of solutions through a continuous and dynamic dialogue between divergent positions (see Klimke and Scharloth). This attitude thus shows the traits of both modern and postmodern thought: on the one hand, solutions to social contradictions were expected to lead to a universal leftist utopia of a fully emancipated world, while on the other hand, local diversity was believed to be more important than in the typical model of modernity. The quest for socio-political solutions does take into account modern (leftist) master narratives, but with the proviso that these solutions are elaborated and tested at the local level by civil society, at a cautious distance from any universalizing postulate. All in all, the modern ideas of '68 are already biased in a postmodern way, in that they replace a singular utopia with a plural utopia of utopias.

The event of '89 changes the postmodern bias of '68 by replacing its leftist utopia of utopias with a single utopia of the universal system of capitalism that harmonizes different nations and separate localities on the global scale. However, the belief in the role of civil society and the liberal recognition of its internal diversity is still as strong in '89 as it was in '68, yet '89 is very different from '68 in that it sees capitalism as the best way to strengthen civil society and a free life of difference.

the whole humanity (like in modernity) or can limit itself to particular groups (like in postmodernity).

As mentioned above, the core of the problem is whether and to what extent people in the collapsing socialist world in 1989 were able to recognize the mechanisms of the then dominant form of capitalism, i.e., neoliberalism—and whether they confused it with the capitalism of the welfare state. However, the history of civil society in the 1990s and afterwards did not develop in the way many philo-capitalist protagonists of this turn of events in '89 had hoped. Today, civil society has ceased to be a free space of diversity and dialogue. It has become a site of radicalization where, to use the words of Chantal Mouffe (in *The Democratic Paradox* and *Agonistics*), there are no more adversaries to fight against, precisely because one accepts to live with them; today's civil society is rather a place of enemies who exclude each other from their own existence.

The history of *paralelní polis* and its afterlife are symptomatic. The idea springs from the heterogeneous cultural practices of the 1960s and their common aim to facilitate emancipatory diversity; defined as a concept in the normalization period of the 1970s, the *paralelní polis* figures as an existential and political tool that enables such diversity within a limited group of dissidents of different political orientations. The concept also attempts to offer Czechoslovakia a model of how to create a diversified civil society. However, the idea of *paralelní polis* is too vague and overshadows fundamental differences between dissidents; moreover, it cannot cope with the impact of '89—its institutionalization of a diversified civil society through structures of neoliberal capitalism. Different groups are gradually losing their ability to talk to each other, so that the current conceptions of *paralelní polis* are mutually exclusive.

The history from '68 to '89 and until today is thus, from the perspective of the *paralelní polis*, the history of the decline of the idea of diversity as an emancipatory process that can be lived in an ongoing dialogue within civil society; it is replaced after '89 by the idea of a civil society of enemies. My conviction is that a significant number of citizens who supported the events of '68 and '89 in capitalist and socialist countries are responsible for the negative dynamics described above. They believed that both historical events ('68 in the capitalist West and '89 in the dissolving socialist world) succeeded in making civil society sensitive to the value of diversity in a new and stable way (if not once and for all). It was believed that such a new sensitivity would tie the capitalist economy to the need for the welfare state (see Gilcher-Holtey). Unfortunately, the proponents of the respective historical events of '68 and '89 underestimated the unbalancing effects of the present-day neoliberal capitalism: it cuts off the economy from the

social policies of the state and thus delegitimizes the state, including the idea of civil society. The result is today's society of divided groups fighting against each other; some are already calling for a strong hand capable of putting society in order at the expense of eliminating emancipatory diversity. In fact, such groups might initially be satisfied with autocratic leaders, at least until the point where the imposed authority they have demanded becomes a common target of significant parts of the emerging civil societies—and the world will meet new '68s and '89s. According to Tom Hayden, a former '68 activist, such switching between emancipatory and constraining moments in history represents a “persistent struggle between social movements and Machiavellians” (the latter being pragmatists). He claims that in this struggle, “the once-radical reforms become the new status quo, the counter-movement is contained, the pragmatists become the new élite [...] and the conflict continues on the battlefield of memory.” However, Hayden predicts that “sooner or later, the new generations will question and resist the programmed future of counter-terrorism, economic privatization, environmental chaos, and sordid alliances justified on the name of this War [against terrorism]”—and again, in the next turn, the resistance of tomorrow will become the pragmatism of the day-after-tomorrow, and so on (Hayden 329–330).

The final question is whether art and theory not only represent the historical process described so far, but are in some way responsible for it. I will limit myself to a hypothetical observation on the theory since art is not in the focus of my essay.²⁰ The theory tends to look optimistically, visionary, and confidently into the future in times of rupture like '68 and '89. I see continuity in the way theorists think that the events of '68 and '89 will create something new that cannot be stopped—an all-encompassing and vibrant civil society in constant dialogue in search of an increasingly emancipatory diversity. The Czech theorists already recognized that they were wrong as early as the post-1968 normalization, which reduced civil society to a small group of intellectual dissidents. However, they slowly regained confidence in the idea in 1989, thinking that different groups of Czech dissidents could find common ground to build their parallel poleis. From the 1980s onwards, Western theorists gradually became more skeptical, although some, despite the

²⁰ The case of art would need a complex analysis: Bondy's novel *Invalidní sourozenci*, for instance, would require a closer examination as well, especially with regard to the problem of modernity and postmodernity from an aesthetic point of view. The novel mixes heterogeneous traditions: the hippy-beat-rock tradition of the 1960s, the older modernist tradition of the surrealist avant-garde, and the genre of science fiction.

similarity of their statement to Hayden's circular perspective on the achievements of '68, showed particular enthusiasm for the changes of 1989. I think that statements like Hayden's are needed not only in times of depression (to promote recovery), but also in times of ruptures, when the enthusiasm has reached its peak—this time with the aim of being better prepared for any kind of normalization that might come (and actually do come) afterwards. Personally, I am skeptical of the argument that often opposes such a preventive attitude, and claim (in fact, preventatively) that preventive awareness of how precarious any utopia is reduces the utopian charge of a vision, practice, or event. Instead, I am convinced that the wisest utopian commitment is both aware of its own precariousness and strives for its sustainability, i.e., with the ability of people to keep up with its decline and eventually to seek the next inspiring utopian energies.

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Civilna družba in umetniški/teoretski proizvajalci kot vzporedni polis? Nekaj razmislekov o paradoksih disidentske kulture od 1968 do 1989 in pozneje

Ključne besede: literatura in politika / Češkoslovaška / 1968–1989 / civilna družba / disidenti / disidentska gibanja / Listina 77 / Havel, Václav / Benda, Václav

Članek obravnava češkoslovaško disidentsko kulturo po letu 1968, zlasti gibanje Listine 77 in njegovo zapuščino po letu 1989. V središču članka je koncept vzporednega polisa, ki ga je vpeljal Václav Benda in o katerem so disidenti veliko govorili: ideja o ustvarjanju novih in neodvisnih kulturnih, gospodarskih in medijskih struktur vzporedno z uradnimi strukturami. Razprava vzporedni polis obravnava kot instrument, s katerim so si gibanja iz leta '68 in po njem, ki so jih vodili intelektualci, umetniki in teoretiki, prizadevala za emancipacijo in diverzifikacijo civilne družbe tako v kapitalističnih kot v socialističnih državah. Zgodovina vzporednega polisa je ob propadu socialističnega sveta po letu 1989 razkrila, da je bila ideja civilne družbe iz leta 1968 ambivalentna, Listina 77 pa se je izkazala za heterogeno gibanje. Mnogi nekdanji člani Listine so začeli verjeti, da bo kapitalizem zagotovil boljšo prihodnost civilne družbe kot socializem, spet drugi pa tega stališča niso sprejeli. Še več, tudi med zagovorniki kapitalizma ni bilo prave enotnosti (nekateri so bili blizu neoliberalizmu, drugi so bili do njega kritični). V nasprotju s šestdesetimi in sedemdesetimi leti zdaj v civilni družbi med temi različnimi stališči ni bilo dialoga, namesto tega sta prevladovali radikalizacija in ekskluzivnost. Radikalna levica, anarhokapitalizem in krščanski fundamentalizem so razvili svoje in medsebojno izključujoče se pripovedi o zapuščini vzporednega polisa.

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