

ABSTRACT

Title: BRUSHING HISTORY AGAINST THE
GRAIN: WHAT THE EXPERIENCE OF EAST
EUROPEAN DISSENT TEACHES US ABOUT
DEMOCRACY

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After the fall of communism in Europe, it was thought that those in the East would look westward to learn about building stable, vibrant democracies. This dissertation, however, proceeds against the current, and considers what the East can teach the West (and the world in general) about the as-of-yet-unexplored possibilities latent within democratic politics. While focusing on the role of the post- and non-Marxist Left in Eastern Europe, my research explains how radical, emancipatory thought and engagement took a non-violent, democratic turn, and subsequently aided in the development of what later came to be known as *civil society*. Thus, my dissertation offers an answer to the following question: *What can the Left's role in the revival of engaged citizenship and democratic politics in Eastern Europe teach us about confronting the enduring dilemmas associated with making democracy work?* The analysis critically assesses the East European dissident experience, between the crushing of Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring (1968) and the East European revolutions of 1989. It finds that democracy was able to develop in this hostile environment because the

opposition remained committed to a non-violent, pluralist spirit of radical political theory and praxis. Furthermore, by revisiting the emergence of democracy precisely where it was not permitted to exist, this research re-presents the East European dissident experience as a constellation of ideas and actions that challenges us to reconsider contemporary forms of citizenship, political engagement, and democracy.

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DEMOCRACY

by

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Preface

Ηθος ανθρωπω δαιμων.¹

Ηρακλειτος

Να πεθαινεις καθε μερα. Να γεννιεσαι καθε μερα. Ν' αρνιεσαι οτι εχεις καθε μερα. Η ανωτατη αρετη δεν ειναι να'σαι ελευτερος, παρα να μαχεσαι για ελευτερια.

Μην καταδεχεσαι να ρωτας: <<Θα νικησουμε; Θα νικηθουμε;>> Πολεμα!²

Νικος Καζαντζακης

¹ One's ethos is one's spirit.

² Die every day. Be born every day. Deny all you have every day. The highest virtue is not to be free, but to fight for freedom. Do not condescend to ask: "Will we be victorious? Will we be conquered?" Fight on!

Foreword

A Democratic Inheritance

The inquiry at the heart of this project is a simple one: what can we learn from the former East European pro-democratic dissidents about democracy that we do not already know? Although much has been written about the various aspects of the East European dissident experience, there is little if anything on how this pro-democratic constellation of ideas, actions, and institutions benefited from its roots in the traditions of the Left. The following analysis revisits precisely how the radical humanist spirit of Western Marxism was transformed and reconciled with democratic thought and praxis by post- and non-Marxist members of the East European democratic opposition. Along with clarifying how radical philosophy was inherited by the pro-democratic dissidents, this study also demonstrates how the radical democratic legacies of East European dissent may augment our democratic inheritance.

Democratic politics, therefore, is the main concern of this study. What it attempts to emphasize is that the work of democratic politics is never over, never completed. Electing representatives may be one expression of democratic politics, but it is surely not enough. Democratic government, politics, and culture need to renew and re-invent themselves if it is to be more than a ritualized process that reproduces the same dilemmas and injustices again and again. All the advances in civil liberties and social justice that mark the historical development of democracy did not occur because people were satisfied with the way things were. No, democracies changed and democratic politics spread because political and social problems were challenged and overcome, bringing about the implementation of better policies or practices. Although the new advances may

have had their own flaws, the belief that change was good for democracy was not in doubt. Where is that belief today? It certainly does not occupy a privileged place in our contemporary political culture. Yet, if that was the case in the past, slavery and legal racism would have persisted, women and the poor may have never gained access to the political process, and the working masses may still be toiling in rotten conditions.

In his famous speech before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., Martin Luther King Jr. said that he had come to collect on a debt—the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all those who were citizens in name but not in substance. In some ways, he and countless others collected on that debt; yet, in other ways, there are many who are still waiting on final payment. In a more general way, something is owed to every American—to every citizen of a democracy, and to every subject under the boot of oppression; what is owed is a life free of political suffering, because *political* suffering is the work of human hands. As such, it is not necessary and can be changed. For anyone facing the imposition to accept the given political order of things—whether in a liberal or illiberal society—and contemplates what can be done, they can find encouragement in the notion that

[t]he human being does not stop short at the existent, but claims to have within himself the measure of what is right; he may be subjected to the necessity and power of external authority, but never in the same way as to natural necessity, for his inner self always tells him how things ought to be, and he finds within himself the confirmation or repudiation of what is accepted as valid (Hegel 1991, 13).

The inner power that buoys the human spirit to which Hegel refers is a critical, *negative* power—that is, it is a cognitive force that enables a person to measure himself against his world. It creates an index of suffering which is juxtaposed to the person's imagination, hopes, and radical needs—needs which under the current conditions can not be fulfilled.

Negative thought, or the critical, imaginative effort to free one's self from such conditions, therefore, becomes the ideational precursor of a process in which a person or people engage in a practical political movement to change the world in the direction of their radical needs.

Such is the story of radical humanism from at least the Enlightenment and the French Revolution onwards; all too often it has been a story noble in notion but bloody in deed. Overcoming that contradiction was not easy, but it was accomplished by the thinkers and activists of the East European democratic opposition. It is because of their radical imagination, existential integrity, and their political sobriety and acumen that there is a story to tell—a story in which Left radicalism and democratic politics finally were reconciled in thought and in practice. The retelling of this story does not come a moment too soon; in his brief but poignant remarks on the 15th anniversary of Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution, former dissident and first democratically elected president Václav Havel reminds us of “What Communism Still Teaches Us:”

Today we live in a democratic society, but many people—not only in the Czech Republic—still believe that they are not true masters of their destiny. They have lost faith that they can really influence political developments much less influence the direction in which our civilization is evolving. ... Democracy is increasingly seen as a mere ritual. In general, western societies, it seems, are experiencing a certain crisis of the democratic ethos and active citizenship. It is possible that what we are witnessing is a mere change of paradigm, caused by new technologies, and we have nothing to worry about. But perhaps the problem is deeper: global corporations, media cartels, and powerful bureaucracies are transforming political parties into organizations whose main task is no longer public service, but the protection of specific clienteles and interests. Politics is becoming a battleground for lobbyists; media trivializes serious problems; democracy often looks like a virtual game for consumers, rather than serious business for serious citizens. ... if democracy is emptied of values and reduced to a competition of political parties that have ‘guaranteed’ solutions to everything, it can be quite undemocratic. This is why we [dissidents] put so much emphasis on the moral dimension of politics and a vibrant civil society as counterweights to political parties and state institutions. ... But above all, it is necessary—just as it

was during the communist era—that we not lose faith in the meaning of alternative centers of thought and civic action (Havel 2004).

The hardened cynic might be inclined to say that Havel does not point out anything new about politics, and sounds much too idealistic with regard to his solutions. That would be a fair assessment if Havel and his fellow dissidents had not accomplish precisely what he now calls on others to do. The power of Havel’s words and the dissidents’ story, therefore, does not lie solely in the originality of its critique (although some of their ideas were quite original), but in the fact that their critiques did not reach their terminus in words—they were realized in action, and changed the world in a fundamental way.

One concluding note on the title of this study; it is an adaptation of a notion found in Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” He wrote:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it his task to brush history against the grain (Benjamin 1968, 257).

While I do not claim to be a historical materialist, both my approach and general philosophical orientation owes much to the tradition that historical materialism is but a part. Thus, *brushing history against the grain*, or, attempting to bring to light what was inspirational, hopeful, and humane from a historical experience overrun by brutality is the overall task this study hopes to accomplish. This should not be confused with the old Goethean and Hegelian notion that good can issue from evil, but rather, can be understood as an acknowledgment of the courageous people who struggled against political horrors and abuses without committing horrors of their own. We owe it to them not to forget their struggle, and we owe it to ourselves to learn form their achievements.

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Chapter 1: Reconciling Incommensurables - Radical and Democratic Politics as Common Project

By the little which now satisfies Spirit, we can measure the extent of its loss.
(Hegel 1977, 5)

My soul has lost possibility. If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere.

(Kierkegaard 1987a, 41)

The Left is clearly at an impasse today, yet its emancipatory political project remains possible because the moment of its realization was missed.³ But if it is not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and rather learn from them, then radical political thought and action must reconcile themselves to certain basic principles of democratic politics. This reconciliation is not only possible, but it was at the heart of one of the most significant political events of recent times—the development of East European dissent and civil society. We can approach this reconciliation by asking: *what can the Left's role in the revival of engaged citizenship and democratic politics in Eastern Europe teach us about confronting the enduring dilemmas associated with making democracy work?* It will be argued that the reemergence of democracy, precisely where it was not permitted to exist, has yet a great deal to offer in terms of both Leftist thought and democratic politics. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to critically assess the thought and politics of the East European dissident experience, particularly between the crushing of

³ I am paraphrasing the opening line of Theodor W. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1973). With regard to the "emancipatory political project," this formulation is an adaptation of Habermas' "emancipatory cognitive interest." In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), Habermas explains that the emancipatory cognitive interest is both a knowledge interest and a human interest in autonomy and responsibility (310-311). Much like the Marxian thought and the Critical Theory in which Habermas is steeped, the emancipatory interest is characterized by critical self-reflection and consciousness in relation to praxis, ideology critique, and immanent critique of everyday life.

Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring (1968) and the East European revolutions of 1989. We will find that democracy was able to develop in this hostile environment because it took a certain spirit of radical political theory and praxis into its service.

By revisiting the reconciliation of radical and democratic politics, we hold up a different representation of democracy against which we can compare its contemporary form and substance. In the process, the experience of East European dissent becomes greater than its historical moment. As Walter Benjamin points out, "...an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it" (Benjamin 1968, 202). Critically revisiting the event of East European dissent now represents it as a constellation of ideas and actions that challenge us to reconsider contemporary forms of citizenship, political engagement, and democratic life. In rising to meet this challenge, we are reminded of the forgotten radicalism of our own political tradition, which can presently serve as a new, unexpected touchstone for critical political thought and engagement.

At the heart of the East European dissident constellation was what Hegel called "the unhappy consciousness."⁴ Through an analysis of this critical spirit in Eastern Europe, we can better grasp its relationship to democratic politics, even with regard to our contemporary moment. This unhappy consciousness is not foreign to democratic politics, or to this side of the Atlantic; it has walked among us before, brought to life in the politics of Thomas Paine, Abolitionists, Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King Jr., and anti-war protesters. The problem is that lately we are hard pressed to find

evidence of this spirit of thoughtful revolt and public engagement that seriously problematizes the political system *as a whole*. Revisiting East European dissent illustrates how this critical, radical—yet democratic—spirit reemerged out of the failure of the Marxian revolutionary project, and how it can now serve as an example of radical democratic thought and praxis amenable even to the American political tradition.

Turning toward Eastern Europe as the main focus, we find that with the Soviet termination of the Prague Spring and its liberalized policies guided by humanist Marxism, a new effort emerged on the part of certain dissidents to reconcile radical thought to democratic politics. This effort was an important precursor to what later came to be known as *civil society*. The current scholarly research on civil society has yet to fully account for the role of this radical democratic aspect of the dissident experience. By elaborating the connections between radical thought and the foundations of civil society in Eastern Europe, an analysis is offered that demonstrates how such thought did, and can continue to, strengthen democratic politics. The East European experience demonstrates that democratic political life is invigorated by individualist expressions of revolt and autonomy that maintain a commitment to non-violence and human dignity. In this connection, the political philosophy of Agnes Heller (a former member of the Budapest School of critical Marxism), and the political life of Václav Havel (especially pre-1989) are of crucial significance. It is out of the ideas and actions of Heller and Havel, among many others, that the informal institutions of East European civil society were formed.

For these reasons, this research also contributes to the current academic debate over the concept and substance of civil society. This debate includes, but is in no way

⁴ This will be elaborated in more detail in the coming pages; for now it is enough to say that the unhappy consciousness is the double awareness of the possibilities for *becoming* and the given conditions that hinder

limited to, the work of Jürgen Habermas, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1992), Adam Seligman (1992), Robert Putnam (1993; 2000), Benjamin Barber (Barber 1984; 1998), Krishan Kumar (2001), and Marc M. Howard (2003). Yet, despite the ongoing attention that civil society receives in scholarly literature, the East European expression of civil society has of late lapsed into intellectual and scholarly neglect, and even dismissal and oblivion. This is particularly unfortunate because there is near consensus among scholars that civil society played a pivotal role in the collapse of European communism, which renewed the broader academic interest in engaged citizenship and informal political groups (Linz and Stepan 1996; Tismaneanu 1993). In more general terms, this inquiry into radical democratic theory and practice may also offer a solution to liberalism's decline, which political theorist Jeffrey Isaac discusses in *The Poverty of Progressivism: The Future of American Democracy in a Time of Liberal Decline* (2003). The solution offered herein, however, has more in common with political theorist Dick Howard's recent call for an "immanent critique of democracy," which challenges and transcends the current academic discourse regarding the proper role and limitations of civil society (D. Howard 2002).⁵

Thus, the political theory and practice inherent in East European civil society has direct normative and practical significance for rethinking democratic politics in the west. At their very core, the legacies of post-Marxist thought that manifested themselves in the

their realization.

⁵ In *The Specter of Democracy* (2002), Dick Howard seeks to salvage what is best and still progressive out of Marxian thought. He begins by asking his reader what if the specter that was haunting Europe at the beginning of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was the specter of democracy rather than the specter of communism. Proceeding with the idea that democracy is a fundamentally good (if sometimes problematic) form of politics, Howard examines how interjecting with the critical spirit of Marx could actually serve to advance the development of democracy—perhaps even beyond the bounds of liberalism. He calls for the *immanent critique of democracy*, which is intended to challenge the reification of current democratic theory

non-violent but agonistic democratic politics of the *parallel polis* in Eastern Europe were western in origin. This analysis, therefore, historically and institutionally maps how western revolutionary theory was reconciled to democratic politics through East European dissident thought and grassroots associations. It concludes by demonstrating the significance of this event for transcending western liberal democracy's inadequacies and limitations.

In the remaining pages of this chapter, the three general aspects of this dissertation will be elaborated. The first aspect is the approach and its significance.⁶ The second aspect, which is largely interwoven throughout, is a clarification of the central theoretical principles, terms, and concepts; a conscious effort has been made to limit opaque jargon in favor of attempting to make political theory speak the language of everyday life. Alas, the exclusion of all specialized language proved neither possible nor desirable. The last aspect is a brief discussion of the three levels of analysis that comprise the greater portion of this study. For expositional clarity, the work is divided into three levels of analysis: the theoretical, the individual, and the political. Each of the levels of analysis will be discussed at length in its own chapter. With regard to the theoretical level, the focus will be on the Budapest School of critical Marxism and its philosophical development toward post-Marxism and radical democratic theory. Turning to the individual level, the Absurd sensibility and "antipolitics" of Václav Havel will take center stage, demonstrating how the Budapest School's notions of individuality and

and practice. Thus, his argument is not against democracy, but rather, his critique is aimed at the reification of democracy.

⁶ In the opening lines of the preface to *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), Theda Skocpol explained how her approach urged her readers to see old problems in a new light. In the same sense, I lay out my approach because so much of critical theory is about how one can re-approach seemingly obvious and mundane political phenomena with a radically different perspective.

radical democratic engagement might take form. On the political level of analysis, theory and individual praxis are tied together, illustrating how radical thought and subjective forms of revolt coalesced to create a new political culture and the informal institutions of the democratic opposition.

It must be kept in mind that these divisions are intellectual, and are not meant to reflect actual ontological categories. The analytic framework is only a structure for understanding the complexities and ambiguities of East European dissent—that is, of this constellation’s specific aspects, as well as how they came together as a whole. The final chapter will relate the lessons of the East European dissident constellation to our contemporary moment, and remind us of our own democracy’s radical moments and legacies. By doing so, the hope is to move beyond a mere thought exercise and begin down the road of grounding an actual and practical reevaluation of the form and substance of democratic politics in general.

General Overview: Approach, Terminology, Levels of Generality

Approach and Terminology

The Left is comprised of a tradition with many vicissitudes. What leads intellectuals, scholars, and activists to continually return to and engage in this tradition, is that it offers critical normative perspectives for both grasping and thinking past given social conditions. Although much scholarship exists that documents the often bitter disagreements among thinkers on the Left, on a very fundamental level, there is a shared attitude or cognitive orientation of revolt that serves as a golden cord to unite and guide these men and women. In what has already been referred to as the unhappy consciousness, we find a *revolt of the mind* that links thinkers as different as Agnes Heller, Theodor W. Adorno, Albert Camus, and Václav Havel in a common cause against

the inhumanities and injustices of their worlds.⁷ If this critical or negative attitude of revolt could be summed up in a single utterance, the old slogan of the Frankfurt School theorists might suffice—*not to collaborate* [nicht zu Mitmachen]. But this attitude of revolt (thankfully) has also learned the hard, brutal lessons of the twentieth century; while refusing to collaborate with a system that still harbors injustices, it does not deceive itself by hoping for or pursuing a grand, final, and all-redeeming Telos. Together with a certain romantic quality that will be discussed later,⁸ this attitude of revolt is tempered—but not undermined—by what can be characterized loosely as an Absurdist outlook. Perhaps it is most clearly and concisely represented by Camus: “it challenges the world anew every second,” while also being accompanied by “the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it” (Camus 1991a, 54).

Given this sober understanding of the limits to revolt, it is not without justification that Václav Havel compares the East European dissident experience to the myth of Sisyphus (Havel 1990, 166-167). But despite the nearly insurmountable difficulties faced by these men and women, it was through their refusal to collaborate (in thought and practice) with “politics as it was” that they were able to transform the old Marxist (and Trotskyist) ideal of *permanent revolution* into an existential commitment to radical democratic political engagement. They proved that a radical orientation to politics not

⁷ Vladimir Tismaneanu writes “What Havel, Michnik, and other thinkers of this orientation share with the Frankfurt School is a Hegelian celebration of the unhappy consciousness, the refusal to abdicate in front of the arrogant facticity of a presumed *terminus ad quem* of history” (Tismaneanu 1998, 152). But, unlike the idealist limitations of the Hegelian conception of the unhappy consciousness, I include its existential aspect. I use the concept “unhappy consciousness” as a general term for concrete and specific moments of subjective revolt.

⁸ The romantic moment in Marx and Leftist critical thought may share the anti-capitalist critique of the old past-oriented tradition of Romanticism, but in terms of Marxian thought it takes on a decidedly future-oriented character. Unlike most Romantics of the late 18th and 19th centuries, Marx was not interested in returning to pre-capitalist values or society. Rather, Marx (much like his contemporary Nietzsche) was

only gives life value and meaning, but also can actually effect substantive political change within the bounds of democratic politics. Do we not see a similar critical spirit—an unhappy consciousness—in Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* (1849) or in the writings and activism of Martin Luther King Jr.?

With these opening comments, the leitmotif of the dissertation is established; yet, this is insufficient in terms of approach and method. It is in this connection that we now turn to some of the central thinkers of critical Marxism. Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács made an indelible mark on Leftist thought by changing the way we understood the legacy of Karl Marx with the publication of his essays on Marxist dialectics, History and Class Consciousness (1923). In the opening paragraphs of the first essay, *What is Orthodox Marxism?*, Lukács writes that one could remain true to the Marxian project even if every one of his findings and individual theses were disproved. This is because

Orthodox Marxism [...] does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results from Marx’s investigations. It is not the ‘belief’ in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a ‘sacred’ book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method* (Lukács 1971a, 1) .

For Lukács, this method was historical materialism, which meant Marx’s critical reformulation of Hegelian dialectics. If we are not to lose the critical edge of Marxian dialectics in the turn to democratic politics, then method must remain of central importance.⁹ Yet, the time has also come for something different. Rather than an orthodox Marxist approach, the unorthodox Marxism of Theodor W. Adorno and the

interested in a revaluation that transcended (*aufheben*) all that came before it. See Michael Löwy, On Changing the World: Essays on Political Philosophy, from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin (1993).

⁹ In a relatively straightforward explanation of his dialectical thought, Marx writes that “... it includes in its comprehension an affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore, takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary” (Marx 1978, 302).

post-Marxism of Agnes Heller comprises the double-movement of this approach.¹⁰ By combining certain aspects of Adorno's *negative dialectics* and Agnes Heller's perspective of *reflected postmodernity*, a new approach can be crafted for grasping the world radically but acting democratically. This approach would remain true to the critical character of Marxian thought, while having the advantage of coming after the ruthless criticism and demise of historical Marxism-Leninism.

The choice of such an approach was not arbitrary, and is justified for three reasons. First, the transformations of Marxian thought and praxis were important parts of the East European dissident experience from the moment of Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin during the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU (1956). Lukács was an important figure in the repressed Hungarian Revolution of 1956,¹¹ and later he, Heller and the other members of the Budapest School became advocates of the humanist Marxist renaissance. It was in the spirit of this renaissance that Alexander Dubcek later began to reform Czechoslovakia in 1967-1968, bringing about the Prague Spring. Second, aside from Lukács, there were other significant points of intersection between Western Marxism and East European dissent, particularly between the thought of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the tactics of the East European democratic opposition. Third, in a way that was very much in the spirit of Marx, there was an invisible but

¹⁰ Heller herself describes such a tendency in her thought, calling it undialectical dialectics: "Undialectical dialectics can also be enlightenment, since it introduces, accompanies, and follows the process of enlightenment. It can possibly be understood in the sense of Horkheimer/Adorno, as the dialectics of enlightenment" (Heller 1999). In general terms, my unorthodox attempt at the renewal of critical theory is not unlike that of political theorist Michael Löwy. Löwy states that his thought "takes its inspiration from the dialectical, historicist, humanist, antipositivist, and anti-evolutionist tradition in Marxist theory. And it tries to bring into the forefront *the hidden romantic moment* in Marxist political philosophy" (Löwy, xiii).

¹¹ Georg Lukács was the Minister of Culture in Imre Nagy's short lived revolutionary government (Tismaneanu 1993, 78).

ineluctable bond between critical thought and emancipatory political action (*praxis*) in Eastern Europe.

This approach and analysis, furthermore, makes explicit and develops the unexplored (and perhaps unintentional) connections between the thought and action of non-Marxist East European dissidents and the thought of Western Marxists. This is done in order to clarify how critical—even radical—thought and praxis was, and still is, a necessary aspect of robust democratic politics. By doing so, a way out of the current impasse on the Left is offered by emphasizing

...what Camus calls a “solidarity of chains”—that binds us together, that enjoins us to support one another in the struggle for democracy, and that suggests that we ought to be cautious and self-critical in our efforts (Isaac 1992, 10).¹²

In this sense, people’s passion for political liberation, autonomy, and democracy takes the critical intellect into its service in order to make political change without violating the *minima moralia* of human dignity. The *self-critical* struggle for (or, in some cases, the deepening of), democracy therefore, anticipates another key point of this study, which is the reinvigoration of the emancipatory political project within certain moral and political limits.

But before we can discuss these limits, the dynamic principles that are at the core of radical democratic politics must first be described. This radical kernel at the heart of the democratic shell is found in the thought of Karl Marx. In his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx states,

[d]emocracy is the solved *riddle* of all constitutions. Here, not merely *implicitly* and in essence but *existing* in reality, the constitution is constantly brought back to its basis, the *actual human being*, the *actual people*, and established as the people’s own work. The constitution appears as what it is, a free product of man (Marx 1978, 20).

¹² For the “solidarity born in chains” to which Isaac refers, see [The Rebel](#), Camus 1991, 17.

This is *the* statement of radical democracy because of its claim that the really existing human being (and the actual people) is the basis on which the democratic constitution stands. To be “radical” for Marx is to go to the root, and the root for man is man himself (Marx 1978, 60). In this sense, Marx cuts straight to the really existing foundation of democratic politics and from there proceeds to re-think the categories, concepts, and practices by which we understand democracy.¹³

This is evident in his treatment of the term *constitution*. By constitution, Marx does not mean merely the *social contract* or the actual document on which the basic structure of our government is written. Constitution here means the actual, tangible, and human constitutive substance of political existence, i.e. what constitutes political life. When the democratic constitution appears as the free product—or externalization (*Entäusserung*)—of the people, then it is a unitary representation of diverse, autonomous, and politically active individuals. The persistence of unfreedom, exploitation, injustice, and abuses of power, therefore, indicates a different, less (or non) democratic constitution. What is also clear from this characterization is that the further away from the actual human being, or in political terms, *the citizen*, that democratic politics moves, the less democratic it is. Citizenship is nothing less than the complex web of human relationships through which the political constitution comes to life.

It is, therefore, within the bounds of democratic politics so conceived that emancipatory politics is to be pursued.¹⁴ Many will say that such a grounding already delimits radical political thought and praxis too much (Lenin and Zizek 2002, 273). This

¹³ This conception of radical democracy is not antithetical to the historical experience of the East European democratic opposition.

is both accurate and erroneous. Conceiving of negativity and revolt within the bounds of democratic politics does in fact *bind* critical thought and praxis to certain principles. But it is one of the key lessons of East European dissent that these principles should never be abandoned; not because they are universally valid, but because these principles serve as a humane *minima moralia* for political revolt. As an emancipatory politics meant to liberate people from oppressive or unjust conditions, this project of revolt must aspire to be a non-dogmatic, non-violent endeavor, not altogether alien to liberal democratic values.

Yet, despite these qualifications, conceiving of the emancipatory political project within the bounds of democracy does something *radical* to democracy. It problematizes “really existing democracy” to its very root; by contrasting the actual practice of democracy today with its professed core values and ideals, it holds a critical mirror up to a reality that often falls quite short of its own standards. Then, due to the logic of its own democratic principles, the need to act in order to eliminate these inadequacies is felt by the citizenry. It follows that when emancipatory politics is committed to democratic principles and proceeds from really existing democracy, the result is a breaking out of its current problematic form by radical-but-nonviolent democratic means. In the end, both the actual forms of political engagement and their core values are transformed by radical democratic praxis; that is, how we go about participating in democracy (citizenship) and what democracy means (its constitution) is changed in the process of its realization.

The way to forego slipping into violence or destructive behavior is to never divorce this project from a simple *categorical imperative* that Marx asserted. This

¹⁴ As Dick Howard points out, “One aspect of democracy is the realization that human intervention can transform reality” (Howard 2002, 106).

categorical imperative demands that we “overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptuous being...” (Marx 1978, 60). If we remain committed to this categorical imperative as we engage in radical thought and praxis, then we will not create human suffering as we struggle against it. This humanist principle of liberation is necessary for such an undertaking, even if it is somewhat ironic coming from Marx. A categorical imperative understood in its Kantian formulation is ahistorical, which is anathema to Marx’s entire philosophical project (historical materialism). Furthermore, this particular one seems to clash with his notion of a violent revolution. While we can recognize that this lone statement seems to be an exception in Marxian thought, it does not mean that it should be ignored. Perhaps now more than ever this old, forgotten fragment needs to be recollected and treated like a lost treasure. It, therefore, presently becomes our “categorical imperative;” in this single statement we have the axiomatic moral principle of our revalued radicalism and democratic politics.

As we shall see, the East European dissident experience demonstrates the effectiveness and feasibility of such an ethically minded revolt. The democratic opposition teaches us that when pursuing liberation, it would be contradictory to employ means that oppress people and create servitude. In poetic terms that truly express this point accurately, Ferdinand Lasalle once wrote,

Point not the goal, until you plot the course,
For the ends and means to man are tangled so
That different means quite different aims enforce;
Conceive the means as ends in embryo.¹⁵

It is precisely for this reason that the East European dissident experience is so important; its non-violent conceptions and tactics of revolt not only played a monumental role in

¹⁵ As quoted in Steven Lukes, Marxism and Morality (1985), 100.

building the peaceful revolutions of 1989, but such a rebellious ethos has a place in western democratic political culture.

Yet, despite citing Marx as the source for our radical democratic principles, it is democratic politics that this research is ultimately focused on—not Marxism.¹⁶ Although there is concern for the contemporary viability of the Marxian critical project, a return to Marx is out of the question. To advocate the rise of the “revolutionary proletariat” would entangle us in dogmatism and exhausted concepts that have little political currency today.¹⁷ Yet it was not so long ago that Jacques Derrida put forth the argument that we no longer have any excuses for not reading and re-reading Marx, as well as a few others (Derrida 1994).¹⁸ It is to these *few others* that we now turn to in order to retrieve what is best and still very much alive in this rich tradition of critical philosophy.

Following the lead of Agnes Heller’s more recent work, this inquiry adopts the perspective of what she calls *reflected postmodernity*. Postmodernity, Heller tells us,

...may be understood as the private-collective time and space, within the wider time and space of modernity, delineated by those who have problems with and queries addressed to modernity, by those who want to take it to task, and by those

¹⁶ Löwy writes that “[t]he renewal of Marxism must start with this humanist/democratic and revolutionary/dialectical heritage to be found in Marx himself and in some of his followers, like Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Gramsci (to cite only three)—a tradition that was defeated during the twenties and the thirties by counterrevolution, Stalinism, and fascism” (xii). My purpose is not so much the renewal of Marxism, as it is the renewal of humanist/democratic and revolutionary/dialectical heritage in the service of transforming how we think about and participate in democratic politics.

¹⁷ I do not deny the presence of an immense global working class suffering from exploitation or the presence of ideological structures whose purpose is to maintain the legitimacy of capitalism. What I do think, however, is that the old discourse of class struggle has lost both its explanatory and inspirational edge. A new approach to such problems is needed, and it is my argument that it ought to be primarily political and not economic.

¹⁸ Derrida writes, “It will always be a fault not to read and reread and discuss Marx- which is to say also a few others- and to go beyond scholarly ‘reading’ or ‘discussions’. It will be more and more a fault, a failing of theoretical, philosophical, and political responsibility. When the dogma machine and the ‘Marxist’ ideological apparatuses (States, parties, cells, unions, and other places of doctrinal production) are in the process of disappearing, we no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for turning away from this responsibility. There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits (Derrida 1994, 13).

who make an inventory of modernity's achievements as well as its unresolved dilemmas (Heller and Fehér 1988, 1).

As such, postmodernity ought to be grasped “not a stage that comes after modernity, it is not the retrieval of modernity—it *is* modern” (Heller 1999b, 4). A perspective of reflected postmodernity, therefore, “could perhaps best be described as the self-reflective consciousness of modernity itself” (Heller 1999b). This stands in stark contrast to what Heller terms naïve *unreflected postmodernity*; a perspective in which “[e]verything is relative, there is no truth, all cultures are equal—[and] such and similar statements are uttered with certainty and with an air of superiority” (Heller 1999b). By adopting the perspective of reflected postmodernity, we are urged to proceed without appeals to metanarratives or all-encompassing faith, but rather with a “modest thoughtfulness which, without pretending to solve everything, will always be ready to give human meaning to everyday life” (Isaac 1998, 18).¹⁹ It is, furthermore, from the theoretical and the practical category of *everyday life* that such a perspective begins to apprehend politics.²⁰

But when apprehended from the perspective of reflected postmodernity, even the most basic or seemingly natural aspects of everyday life are re-evaluated. For example, history is recognized as an important part of everyday life, but its linear, causal or deterministic appearance is problematized. Any discourse of socio-political progress toward a grand Telos of perfectibility is eyed skeptically. The critical perspective adopted here has forsaken all appeals to grand narratives, “historical laws,” or even necessity that realizes itself through rational but yet undiscovered historical tendencies

¹⁹ This is not Heller, but Isaac quoting Camus—the sentiment, however, fits perfectly.

²⁰ The philosophical character of everyday life will be explained fully in chapter two.

that grant some order to the chaotic realm of politics (Heller 1999b, 4-5).²¹ Rather, the temporal conception of a “present-tense” that continually stands between past and future becomes the historical locus of political inquiry (Antohti and Tismaneanu 2000, 3-13).

This locus brings about a critical rupture in what is typically understood and accepted as the historical continuum of everyday life. That is, the meaning of the past and the future is continually mediated, reconsidered, and, therefore, can be altered from the present-tense. In an unreflected upon way, these “alterations” are often crafted by hegemonic political elites and official institutions.²² But, through efforts of critical political engagement, there are moments in which change can be precipitated *from below*. With regard to democratic politics, change from below is (theoretically) a more viable possibility than it would be under an authoritarian or totalitarian regime. But as demonstrated by the general historical record, this notion may not be wholly accurate. Immanuel Kant offers an insight that must give us pause:

[a] greater degree of civil freedom appears advantageous to the freedom of mind of the people, and yet it places inescapable limitations upon it; a lower degree of civil freedom, on the contrary, provides the mind of with room for each man to extend himself to his full capacity (Kant 1999, 269).

Despite this phenomenon, by adopting the perspective of reflected postmodernity it is possible to awaken the unhappy consciousness among citizens both under the thumb of oppressive regimes, as well as those living in conditions where most do not perceive the cause for alarm. Everyday life, therefore, can be understood as both the place of assimilation to the current political conditions, and beginning with a critical reorientation to political life, the ground from which one challenges and breaks with such conditions.

²¹ It is another matter, however, to subjectively transform the contingent into the necessary.

²² One need only consider the re-writing of history textbooks to reflect a governing party’s values or political vision.

In terms of Adorno's negative dialectics, this break or rupture is called *nonidentity*. Nonidentity can be understood as a more theoretically complex expression of the attitude of revolt stated earlier. As such, it is a definite conceptual and existential position whose purpose, quite ironically, is to critically challenge all definite or seemingly natural concepts and practices.²³ Thus, if Heller's reflected postmodernity is the perspective that this analysis adopts, then it is Adorno's negative dialectic that animates its critical dynamic. Nonidentity is the core notion of Adorno's negative dialectics; it is what distinguishes *negative dialectics* from Hegelian and Marxian dialectics because nonidentity is a theoretical refutation of the Hegelian *identity* or *unity* principle, i.e. unity of opposites.²⁴ In terms of the individual, nonidentity manifests itself in the tension between the possibilities for subjectivity and the limited socially produced subject. As such, it is the double consciousness of real unfreedom and possible liberation; nonidentity, therefore, refers to a socially constituted subject to the openness of or possibilities for their subjectivity that are presently limited or blocked. Politically, this tension is extended to bring into focus the conflict between citizens and how their own power confronts them as a hostile, alien political force. This concept also illuminates the unexplored possibilities for critical engagement beyond the alternatives presented by *those officially in power* or the *various opposition parties or groups already*

²³ By referring to nonidentity as a "position"—worse yet, an existential position—I am self-consciously misrepresenting Adorno's presentation of nonidentity to a certain degree. In *Negative Dialectics*, he writes the dialectic is not a standpoint. Adorno states that "[t]he name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder... Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint" (Adorno 1973, 5). It would be more accurate to refer to nonidentity as a "moment" in a historically situated process of negation, yet this Hegelian phraseology is somewhat awkward. Although it is precisely this understanding of nonidentity that I mean by the term, the language of "nonidentity as an existential position" grounds the moment of negation in the actions of an individual in a more obvious way.

²⁴ A fairly straightforward example of this is in Adorno's one-line refutation of Hegel's system: "The whole is the false" (Adorno 1978, 50). Adorno's line is specifically challenging Hegel's argument at the

present—thus refusing the very structure of political and individual choice offered by a system.

The perspective of reflected postmodernity, therefore, brings about a position of nonidentity in so far as it denies anything but a self-grounding critique as a legitimate basis for political inquiry. From this position—this rupture—it is possible to radically problematize how we have come to be and conceive of our political lives. By doing so we can re-consider what has been suppressed or overlooked in our past that would grant us a different perspective on the present and future. With regard to the past, Heller tells us that “past events could not only happen otherwise, but they are also constantly changed, since every act of recollection modifies them. One can tell the same story in a thousand different ways” (quoted in Antohi and Tismaneanu 2000, 3). Thus, recollecting and reinterpreting the meaning of the past (and what has come to be) from the historical locus of the present-tense is directly related to activating latent emancipatory possibilities. How many different ways can we re-tell the story of democracy and reconsider what it means today if we presently assume a radical position of nonidentity with its current form? In what new directions can this critical inquiry lead us? To approach these questions adequately, we will need to follow through with the problematization of history.

Both the perspective of reflected postmodernity and negative dialectics is concerned with the subjective and objective sides of history. The subjective side of history is typically understood as what a person (or thing²⁵) has internalized, and how that

beginning of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “The True is the whole” (Hegel 1977, 11). In a more general way, negative dialectics is Adorno’s dialectical refutation—or *aufheben*—of dialectics.

²⁵ Keeping with Marxian dialectics, commodities, institutions, and other products of human labour (i.e. things) carry with them internalized aspects of social and political relationships.

has come to produce and limit one's historical existence. Revolting against and surpassing these limitations is also a crucial aspect of subjective historical existence. In terms of politics, therefore, we can speak about an individual's subjective metabolism—how people have been conditioned to think or act, and the process by which they rebel against this conditioning. The objective side of history is made up of the intersubjective relationships, artifacts, and structures that issue from people's subjective metabolisms.

This objective side is generally encountered in everyday life as the shared realm of culture, politics, and economics. But what is emphasized by this approach, is that objective history is only what people create themselves and send out into the world. In terms of politics, this means that we are not only responsible for the injustices that confront us, but that we are also the only beings that can change such circumstances. Together, these subjective and objective sides of history constitute people's concrete political constellation, which stands as a *continually open or incomplete* unity. This incomplete unity is made up of what Adorno called *sedimented history*. The term "sedimented" highlights all the layers of subjective and objective existence, and possibilities for change that such an approach brings to light. With regard to this understanding of history and constellation, Adorno writes that

[t]his history is in the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the individual has its place. Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it (Adorno 1973, 163).

Constellation, as was already indicated, must not be confused with any statement of fundamental ontology.²⁶ Rather it is a concept meant to help us grasp the complex of

²⁶ That is, the Heideggerian notion that Being already exists, and that human existence is a special kind of Being because it can raise the question "what is Being?" and then proceed to disclose it. With regard to

history. Constellation, therefore, “represent[s] from without what the concept has cut away within: the ‘more’ which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being” (Adorno 1973, 162). In terms of subjectivity, this means that when people grasp things (including themselves) in their constellation, they become more aware of the objective sediments and internalized limitations imposed on their subjectivity. By doing so, they also can begin to think past these limitations, and re-create themselves in ways that break through those limits. Objectively, seeing political reality in its many-sidedness not only reveals more of its shortcomings, but also suggests a plurality of possibilities for overcoming those shortcomings. With regard to such a critical perspective, Adorno states that

[c]ognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object. As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers (Adorno 1973, 163).

Thus, constellation refers us to an open and problematic historical horizon that contains real subjective and objective possibilities for negation and overcoming. People, therefore, are also more than their historical constellation, as is evidenced in their ability to negate and overcome it.

With this notion of constellation in mind, we must now follow through with the historical argument to complete the explanation of the work’s approach. Keeping with nonidentity, we find it to be the dynamic historical position (or moment) that creates

such a fundamental ontology, Adorno writes “[i]f ontology were possible at all, it would be in an ironic sense, as the epitome of negativity. What remains equal to itself, the pure identity, is the worst. . . . If one were drafting an ontology in accordance with the basic state of facts, of facts whose repetition makes their state invariant, such an ontology would be pure horror. . . . Good would be nothing but what has escaped from ontology” (Adorno 1973, 121-122). In an earlier section of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno states that “[r]egarding the concrete utopian possibility, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things” (Ibid, 11). The significance of this “concrete utopian possibility” will be discussed in the coming pages.

ruptures, which objectively presents these possibilities for rethinking the current political constellation. These ruptures are political events that occur when subjective resistance and revolt from below begins to gain ground and alter political conditions. In terms of objective history, they create what Heller calls a *Kairos*,²⁷ or the right time (or *season*) for political change.²⁸ In terms of subjectivity this Kairos is experienced as what Walter Benjamin calls *Jetztzeit*, or now-time (Benjamin 1968, 261, 263).²⁹ This is a moment in which it is possible to alter the past, and in turn the future, from the actions undertaken in the present-tense. *Jetztzeit* can be understood in its full mystical or enchanted sense, because there is something “unearthly” (by common standards) that such revolutionary changes usher into everyday life.

When the efforts to revolutionize one’s political existence becomes a broader movement, then *Jetztzeit* passes over from the individual and comes to characterize the broader political season; such an event can lead to the transformation of the entire constellation’s political metabolism. The brief period of revolution in Eastern Europe (1989), or any periods of revolution for that matter, is an example of this political phenomenon at its pinnacle. The concept of now-time, furthermore, reveals the power that the present can wield over the past and future; now-time demonstrates “that the authentic moment of an innovative present interrupts the continuum of history and breaks away from its homogeneous flow” (Habermas 1987, 11). This break is the subjective historical aspect of nonidentity, which instigates a continual renewal of radical consciousness; an unhappy consciousness which in turn grasps the present as an event

²⁷ (Heller 1999, 9). *Kairos* (καίρος) is a Greek word that denotes the proper time or season for something to occur.

²⁸ Nietzsche translates *Kairos* as “the right time” (Nietzsche 1966, 223).

and calls into question the present moment's expression of the past and future. While critical political engagement remains inherently future oriented, Benjamin's concept of now-time also

twists the radical future-orientedness that is characteristic of modern times in general so far back around the axis of the now-time that it gets transposed into a yet more radical orientation toward the past. The anticipation of what is new in the future is realized only through remembering [Eingedenken] a past that has been suppressed" (Habermas 1987, 12).

It is with such a theoretical approach that this analysis presently revisits the East European dissident experience and their modes of radical citizenship and democratic politics. Furthermore, although it was not called reflected postmodernity or nonidentity, such a dynamic (or moment) of revolt was present in the thought and politics of East European dissent.

Thus the purpose of this research is to create a rupture in how we think about democracy, in the hopes of revolutionizing it. Nonetheless, it ought to be made clear that the political and moral ground on which this critical perspective and nonidentity stands is paradoxical; the revolt inherent in nonidentity may strive for and achieve some new degree of freedom, but as Heller states, "freedom is a foundation that does not found" (Antohi and Tismaneanu 2000, 12). For this reason, it is only in connection with principles of radical democracy that the revolt of nonidentity can definitely take non-violent political form. This is precisely one of the key legacies of East European civil society; it demonstrated how people committed to a radical conception of liberation and concrete democratic practices created nonviolent revolutionary change.

²⁹ Now-time is also meant to be a critique of both the Enlightenment's notion of progress and sclerotic historicism.

This is an important bridge between the East European experience and our own historical moment. Put simply, it transcends the current conceptual limitations of democratic politics and shows us new ways of thinking about and practicing democracy and citizenship. In terms of the above stated paradox, Dick Howard makes a similar point in general theoretical terms. He writes that

[d]emocracy constantly activates that quest [for freedom] by undermining all attempts to give it a fixed and univocal definition that would assimilate it to the world of *physis* rather than admit that its dependence on representation binds it to the appearing world of the *nomie* where political judgment can not be replaced by the appeal to scientific determinism (D. Howard 2002, 98).

This means that citizens must engage in political life without appeal to any universals—neither natural laws nor absolute Truths.³⁰ Yet, that does not preclude the possibility of truth (or truths) for critical engagement aimed at autonomy and freedom. The principles herein regarding radical democratic politics, and a commitment to political means that do not violate their ends, grounds such thought and praxis in a type of historically situated truth. This historical truth or certainty is generated by a critical orientation and existential commitment to political engagement that seeks to point out real problems, break with the conditions that sustain them, and then undertake to change these circumstances. History has demonstrated that abstract or metaphysical truths alone are not sufficient for political life. “Man must prove the truth, that is the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice” (Marx 1978, 144).

The way to prove this truth through critical engagement was sketched by Karl Marx quite early in his intellectual life. Writing in a programmatic fashion, he states that “...we do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through criticism of the old” (Marx 1978, 13). This criticism proceeds by

comparing the world that exists to the principles and ideals from which it draws legitimacy. The contradictions between the ideal and the reality—and the distance between what is and what is supposed to be—serve as the new yardsticks of truth by which the contemporary world can be accused of failure or falsity. Through this process, revolt and liberation ground themselves in criticism, and thus create a self-consciously limited, historical truth; this at once foregoes the false image of universal and absolute truth, while also avoiding the bottomless pit of relativism. Thus, freedom’s paradoxical character—being a foundation that does not found—does not scuttle our critical efforts, but rather helps them spring to life.

This is so because, although freedom may be a foundation that does not found, “[e]very political act grounds itself; every life grounds itself; every philosophy is self-grounding” (Heller 1999b, 14). Political actions and critical ideas become self-grounding when those who engage in such acts take responsibility for such action; that is, they take responsibility for what they negate and subsequently bring into the world. The open air of democratic politics allows for exactly this kind of political action; the type of action that is founded solely on the autonomy of its citizenry, and that is validated by their willingness to claim it as their own creation. This is important because the reality that one creates via such critical thought and praxis brings certain concrete realities into the world that all people will have to deal with to some degree. Once subjective forms of revolt and negation take on an objective character (and *Jetztzeit* clashes with and perhaps overtakes *Kairos*), the outcomes of such action become actual sediments of the broader political constellation. Only through people taking responsibility for critical political engagement can this paradoxical situation be managed. As Heller says,

³⁰ As was stated earlier, Heller shares a similar view; see (Heller 1999, 16) and (Adorno 1973, 34).

One lives up to the paradox of modernity if one takes responsibility for one's historical truth—that is, the truth in which one is involved absolutely as a transient, finite, being, of finite knowledge and finite mind, as one who is aware of his or her fragility and the limits of his insights absolutely (Heller 1999b, 18).

Such are the insights and truths that this analysis seeks to reveal through combining a perspective of reflected postmodernity and the dynamic of nonidentity.

Levels of Analysis: (a) Theoretical

The specific concepts and significance of the Budapest School will be addressed in the second, theoretical chapter. The following comments, however, are meant to work through some of the preliminary concerns and principles at the heart of the theoretical level of analysis, as well as each subsequent level of analysis. In terms of the theoretical level of analysis we can approach these preliminary matters through the following questions: To what extent was the emancipatory political project transformed by the Budapest School? and What legacies of the Marxian and Western Marxist tradition did they adapt for this purpose? To some degree, the transformation of the Western Marxist legacy is addressed on each level of analysis, but it is in chapter 2 that it is taken up solely on the level of ideas.

What will become clear to the reader is that the purpose of returning to the legacies of critical philosophy is not to revive a messianic or apocalyptic totalizing Weltanschauung that promises to create paradise on earth. Too many 20th century political experiments began with just such an emancipatory political vision, only to have it come crashing down amid unpardonable suffering and loss. The traditional humanist *metanarratives* and their hidden nihilistic kernels, which promise ethical perfection and a totally harmonious society, have proven that the only thing they guarantee is oppression and human sacrifice. What is clearly absent from the critical thought of the Budapest

School is this impulse to sacrifice people today for the paradise of tomorrow. Thus, one of the crucial transformations that the Marxian project underwent was in terms of the relationship between political means and ends.

This question of means and ends has been touched upon already in prior comments. We return to it now because it is central for both the thought of the Budapest School and for the reconciliation of radical theory and praxis to democratic politics. On the level of theory, it brings into focus matters of political ideals and how we go about pursuing them. Recalling that foundation that does not found, freedom (and autonomy) stands as both the ultimate modern political ideal and the end of radical thought and praxis. Conceptually, freedom is pluralistic enough to be meaningful in broad political terms, while it can take on concrete significance when evoked in the context of specific unfreedoms.

With regard to challenging a specific unfreedom, the thinkers of the Budapest School gave morality and ethics a more decisive role in determining the means to pursue liberation. Such concern over radical means was necessary, because, as was already said, too much oppression and destruction had been justified while pursuing grand political ends.³¹ Learning from the experience of East European dissent, we now know that only by delimiting subjective revolt and grounding it in the principles of democratic politics, can we articulate a consistently non-violent yet radical means to pursue liberation. In this connection, the Budapest School is the crucial philosophical crossroads between Western Marxism, East European dissent, and radical democratic politics. Their theoretical work is the riddle of radical humanism solved for those

³¹ As with the Bolshevik political ethic, all means are justified that support and advance the revolution (which was synonymous with human emancipation).

attempting to pursue political change while avoiding the trappings of revolutionary violence.

The notion of liberation (as a form of freedom), however, requires further clarification if it is to serve as our end or ideal. Liberation will be formulated in three different but interrelated ways—one for each level of generality. On the theoretical level, we will proceed from the Hegelian formulation found in the Philosophy of Right. Brimming with the confidence and optimism of his age, Hegel writes that “[t]he Good is realized freedom, the absolute and ultimate end of the world” (Hegel 1991, 157). For Hegel, *absolute freedom realized* is achieved when Spirit has overcome servitude in all its forms and has remade the world according to Freedom and Reason. All too often this is taken to be some sort of concrete Telos for Hegel, making it the most undialectical aspect of his philosophical system. Yet, absolute freedom realized takes on a different meaning if we consider it not as a concrete Telos, but rather as a utopian ideal that people long for.³² Grasped as such, the Hegelian formulation of liberation is what Agnes Heller called a “fertile utopia” (Heller 1976, 130).

The introduction of utopia into an analysis that grounds itself in the experience of East European dissent may seem erroneous to those familiar with the historical record. After all, there is near consensus among academics and intellectuals that the revolutions of 1989 were different from previous revolutions because of, among other reasons, their

³² Absolute freedom realized can be understood in terms of Agnes Heller’s conception of “radical needs;” a citizenry rich in needs is good for political life, and such a profound need can only inspire people to equally great political deeds; see The Theory of Need in Marx, (Heller 1976). Also, the concept of “longing” is a romantic theme; in what can now be understood as a complement to the concept of need, a very young Georg Lukács wrote “Longing leads men to actions and events, and no action or event is worthy of becoming the fulfillment of longing.” (Lukács, “Longing and Form,” Soul and Form (1974), 103.) Thus, absolute freedom realized is a radical need people long for, but despite their greatest efforts can not fully realize. For this reason, it is a constant source of political inspiration. These issues are taken up in depth in chapter two.

non-utopian character. As the political sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt has stated in his essay *The Breakdown of Communist Regimes*, “[t]here was no totalistic, utopian vision rooted in eschatological expectations of a new type of society” (quoted in Tismaneanu 1999, 93). Yet in nearly the same breath, Eisenstadt does acknowledge the vague utopian character of the pursuit of freedom on the part of those involved in East European dissent. It is this vague but fertile utopia, or what we will come to describe later as a “weak messianic power,”³³ that is revived by proceeding from this Hegelian formulation of freedom.

With regard to the emancipatory project inherent in radical thought and praxis, a weak but fertile utopia is necessary. The idea at the heart of this argument is that if tomorrow can not be better, then there is no point in struggling against oppression and injustice today. The use of “utopia” here is synonymous with Leszek Kolakowski’s formulation in his classic essay *The Concept of the Left*. Kolakowski writes

I use the word “utopia” deliberately and not in the derogatory sense that expresses the absurd notion that all social changes are pipe dreams. By utopia I mean a state of social consciousness, a mental counterpart to the social movement striving for radical change in the world—a counterpart itself inadequate to these changes and merely reflecting them in an idealized and obscure form. It endows the real movement with the sense of realizing an ideal born in the realm of pure spirit and not in current historical experience (Kolakowski 1968, 69).

The fertile utopia of *absolute freedom realized* turns our attention to all the ways in which freedom remains unrealized in political life as well as actual peoples’ longing for conditions to be better.³⁴ Yet, since this utopia is endowed with only a weak messianic power, it no longer can precipitate an apocalyptic totalization. As has been stated earlier, the grand *metanarratives* of modernity have, for the most part, lost their hold over human

³³ This formulation was introduced by Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” (Benjamin 1968).

imagination.³⁵ The weak messianic power that was brought to life in Eastern Europe took a novel form; this unhappy, critical political consciousness made itself felt through underground associations and expressions of subjective revolt, which became the basis for the re-conceptualization and revival of citizenship. In practical political terms, the radicalization of citizenship that sprang from this basis in Eastern Europe represents a concrete example of nonidentity and revolt within the bounds of democratic politics. As such, it is the phenomenon that we can follow through all three levels of analysis to demonstrate the real fluidity between radical ideas, critical individuals, and the political institutions that they created.

With this said, it is necessary to turn to the individual level of analysis. It is only within the real, historical world that the above theoretical concerns mean anything—otherwise we may only be engaging in ideal abstractions. Adorno argued that philosophy’s truth content is determined by “the degree to which the real has entered into concepts, manifests itself in these concepts, and comprehensively justifies them” (Adorno 1989, 3). It is through the individual, however, that we will begin to see how concepts enter back into everyday life, through the consciousness and political metabolism of real people.

Levels of Analysis: (b) Individual

In the preceding comments the individual has already made his presence felt. Whether the carrier of a critical consciousness or the author of political action, the individual *as citizen* is the most complex—and most important—aspect of this story. But before problematizing the individual in terms of “the radical democratic citizen,” we

³⁴ This links back to Adorno’s concept of “concrete utopian possibilities.”

must carry over our weak utopian ideal. To articulate the weak-but-fertile utopian conception of liberation on the level of the individual, we return to Theodor W. Adorno. *With the power of the subject, to breakthrough the illusion of constitutive subjectivity*;³⁶ this is what Adorno announced to be his duty in the foreword to his masterpiece, Negative Dialectics. This notion is at the heart of nonidentity, and is utopian in so far as its complete realization is not possible. One can never wholly free themselves from internalized social conditioning and their illusory constitutive subjectivity. But as some East European dissidents (e.g. Václav Havel) demonstrated, the subjective strength of the unhappy consciousness is a great source of critical power for pursuing liberation and autonomy.

With Adorno's principle we also have another re-formulation of the Hegelian ideal of absolute freedom realized, as well as its Marxian inversion, formulated in his categorical imperative. This is not to say that all three statements are the same; actually they are quite different. Yet, despite their differences, they all share a similar spirit: for Hegel, freedom for all; for Marx, the revolt against and liberation from any and all instances in which man is oppressed or abused; and for Adorno, a similar act of revolt, but this time directed against internalized oppression, which undoubtedly implies a revolt against its outward or political sources as well. What ought to be made clear, however, is that the ideals evoked by these statements do not originate *objectively*, but are self-conscious choices on the part of individuals. As was hinted at earlier, this underlying attitude of revolt can even be considered a Left-oriented version of the Fichtean or even

³⁵ Yet, the argument has been made that the current resurgence of fundamentalism (in its various forms) is proof that certain grand narratives are still persuasive.

³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften, Band 6, 10. *Mit der Kraft des Subjekts den Trug konstitutiver Subjektivität zu durchbrechen*. (My translation)

Romantic subjective revolt, which asserts “I am thoroughly my own creation” (Fichte 1987, 73). The only caveat is that this revolt tempers its romantic utopian longing with an Absurdist outlook, and is delimited by a commitment to radical democratic politics.

This *Subjekt* of revolt, therefore, must have both an explicit *individualistic* political character, as well as be a significant aspect or member of a larger political community. It is for this reason that we look to the concept and the experience of being a *citizen*. By focusing on the radicalization of citizenship we locate an aspect of political life that is identifiable to men and women who may find themselves in vastly different cultures and/or strata of society. As such, it is a political category rich in difference and generally open-ended. Citizenship also inherently implies that there is a vital connection between individual citizens and their larger political constellation. Furthermore, the historical example of Havel as both *a subjective moment of nonidentity* and *citizen* satisfies both aspects of radical democratic politics—that is, the radical side and the democratic.

But given that we are concerned with radical democratic politics, the problem that justifies emancipatory political action on the part of the citizen has yet to be clarified. It is evident that critical thought and political action begins with the individual, but the question now before us is “why?” Why is an individual moved to critically reflect on his existence as a citizen and take the position of nonidentity—whether it be under East European “really existing socialism” in a *people’s democracy* or in western-style liberal democracy? It is at this juncture that we breathe new life into an old, and to some extent reified, concept—the concept of alienation (*Entfremdung*). While this phenomenon will

be addressed in-depth in the subsequent chapters, a brief introduction to this problem is appropriate.

There may be no greater problem facing people today in terms of their political life than alienation. The severity of this phenomenon may vary greatly depending on one's location in the world, but in essence the problem is the same. This is because instead of people's political lives constituting the basis for their freedom, it actually is the source of their servitude; and it is a servitude that they themselves create. Alienation, or estrangement, has come to mean many different things for political thought. For the sake of clarity, the term is grounded in its Marxian form, but articulated with a specific and explicit political substance. Alienation for Marx is not the same as it is for Hegel; the latter often spoke of externalization (*Entäußerung*), while Marx recognized this but also wanted to explain something more dire.³⁷ For Marx, alienation was not only the externalization of man's subjective, creative being, but it is also how one's own externalized being is used against him by others. In terms of wage workers and owners of capital, Marx explains

[w]hatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less he is himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, *an external existence*, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien (Marx 1978, 72).

Thus alienation is a dehumanizing, oppressive, and exploitative social phenomenon perpetrated by those with superior power against those in a subordinate social position.

³⁷ Although alienation in the sense Marx emphasizes does appear in Hegel—particularly in the famous *Herr und Knecht* (or Master/Slave dialectic) in the Phenomenology of the Spirit—it is with Marx that the concept's political significance truly explodes.

This conception of alienation takes on a specifically political character when considered together with the preceding comments on radical democracy and the citizen. The radical basis of the democratic constitution is the actual person—politically speaking, the citizen. Democratic legitimacy is based on citizens lending their autonomy and creative power to the democratic constitution, which includes its formal institutions, the representatives of the people, and its judicial aspects. In a sense, the freedom and power inherent in the actual person is externalized and embodied in democratic politics broadly conceived. This moment of externalization, however, also becomes the crucial turning point in which alienation occurs. The freedom and power that citizens lend their democratic politics at times becomes an alien power, which stands against them in their political lives. Although that power is their own—that is, it forms the ground on which democratic political life is built—it all too often is the power that creates and sustains injustice as well. Whether reified in institutionalized form or as legitimacy empowering political elites, the power symbolized in the concept “by the people” all too often becomes a power *against the people*. Thus when we speak of alienation in terms of politics, we focus on how institutions and elites oppress or neglect their citizens with power that is derived from the citizenry itself. By returning to the politics of East European dissent, we may be able to learn how citizens can overcome political alienation and bring democracy back to the level of the people—its actual basis.

Thus, the individual level of generality is primarily concerned with the act that brings liberation and a new expression of freedom into the world. Recognizing that if we are to have both radical politics and a commitment to democratic (and moral) limitations, we must proceed with two equally important, if contradictory, practices of freedom. The

first is liberation, or negative-yet-creative praxis; the other is, quite ironically, self-limiting. Although these practices of freedom will be discussed in the context of historical events and people, some theoretical clarification is in order.

Freedom as liberation, broadly conceived, operates on all of the levels of generality. Whether it is crashing through the facades erected by ideology, or is employed as a means for the individual to lend a voice to his suffering, such an expression of freedom must primarily “be defined in negation only, corresponding to the concrete form of a specific unfreedom” (Adorno 1973, 17-18). Although this may seem like an unnecessarily limited understanding of freedom, it serves to ground it in definite political relations. As Adorno explains,

[f]reedom turns concrete in the changing forms of repression, as resistance to repression. There has been as much free will as there were men with the will to be free. But freedom itself and unfreedom are so entangled that unfreedom is not just an impediment to freedom but a premise of its concept (Adorno 1973, 265).

This dialectical conception of freedom, furthermore, corresponds perfectly to the approach’s present-tense historical locus; in terms of the present-tense,

[f]reedom is a moment, rather in a twofold sense: it is entwined, not to be isolated; and for the time being it is never more than an instant of spontaneity, a historical node, the road to which is blocked under present conditions (Adorno 1973, 219).

Thus, with “liberation-as-negation” we have a conception of freedom that is creative as well; it not only sets radical consciousness in motion, but does so through historically particular challenges to present-tense moments of political oppression.

Yet, there is the other, self-limiting practice of freedom, and it is immanently related to the issue of autonomy. Much will be said about autonomy in the coming chapters; but for now we turn to Adorno once again to express the essence of this self-

limiting practice of freedom: “Contemplation without violence, the source of all the joy of truth, presupposes that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distant-nearness” (Adorno 1978, 89). If the *object* spoken of includes other people, then this *distant-nearness* is a warning to the unhappy consciousness against solipsism and a reminder of the means-ends problem. Similarly, it is what Heller called the awareness of one’s fragility and the limits of one’s insights. In more concrete terms that have explicit bearing on the subjective revolt and its encounter with others, Fichte tells us

[w]hatever these beings may be in and for themselves, you ought to treat them as self-subsistent, free, autonomous beings completely independent of you. Presuppose as already known that they can determine their purpose quite on their own and independently of you (Fichte 1987, 76).

In this sense, the possibility of liberation, autonomy, and therefore, human dignity, is extended to the condition of other individuals that a citizen in revolt might encounter while being politically engaged. For this reason, one must limit one’s own revolt in order to secure it for others. Through such self-limitation, more aggressive or destructive acts of negation become impossible if one continues to maintain a non-contradictory relationship between radical democratic means and ends. Lenin’s notion that in order to affect radical political change “[w]e must hit people mercilessly in the head, even when we are ideally against any violence between men” could never be justified according to the principles being advanced here (quoted in Lukács 1971b, 94).

The historical examples found in the East European dissident experience lend substance to the abstract and sometimes lofty sounding ideals presented thus far. The purpose of this research, however, is to demonstrate that these notions are not too lofty, and not so abstract to make them only applicable in the realm of thought. They were once actual political practices, and they can now serve to inspire similar actions on the

part of citizens today. To not lose touch with the radical-yet-nonviolent aspects of democratic engagement, we turn to their political re-emergence in Eastern Europe. So following Hegel's famous challenge—*Ἰδου Ροδος, ἴδου και το πιδιμα*³⁸—East European civil society will serve as our Rhodes, over which we can not jump. In which case, the political level of analysis becomes our “rose,” the stage on which, we must dance (Hegel 1991, 21-22).

Levels of Analysis: (c)Political

This chapter illustrates how radical theory and subjective action became one, and subsequently created the foundations, structures, and dynamics of East European civil society. The relationship between the re-conceptualization of citizenship and the structures that supported the practice of this citizenship will be of central importance. This discussion will be accompanied by a critique that reveals how the current literature on civil society too often ignores, dismisses, or misinterprets the development of civil society in Eastern Europe. In the following comments, however, some preliminary concerns regarding the radicalization of politics need to be addressed. These concerns can be summarized in the following three points. First, radical political thought action can be dangerous, but, as history demonstrates, it is a necessary aspect of vibrant democratic politics. Second, the revolt inherent in nonidentity can be committed to democratic politics, while not being necessarily bound to democracy's current forms or modes. Third, the political level is where ideas, and the individuals that hold them, both unite and clash; that is, politics, including democratic politics, is about *both* solidarity and struggle. In Gramscian terms, the *war of position* over politico-cultural hegemony is

³⁸ Here is Rhodes, here too you jump.

fought through civil society.³⁹ With regard to what constitutes political action, Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher's characterization is satisfactory.

In a rough approximation, actions can be termed political if persons act in their capacity as citizens, and if they address, or incidentally mobilize, other persons in their capacity as citizens (Heller and Fehér 1988, 78).

Political action on the part of an engaged citizenry is what constitutes democratic politics and is an indispensable aspect of what is commonly referred to as civil society. Yet, as we shall see in the following discussion of these three points, what is meant by terms such as citizenship and civil society will be reconsidered along the lines of East European dissent.

Our first point claims that political action can be dangerous, but it is a necessary aspect of democratic politics. It can be dangerous because what may begin as healthy democratic agon may result in sharper political antagonisms. Furthermore, the unforeseen or unintended consequences of political action loom heavily over any such actions due to their public character. It was for these reasons that Heller and Adorno, as well as Václav Havel, emphasized the connection between moral responsibility and political engagement. In their own distinct ways, these thinkers have all understood the dangers inherent in combining moral relativism and radical politics. To not forsake such politics altogether, they realized that it was necessary to burden radical theory and praxis with the weight of moral culpability for what it brings into the world. Thus, it seems that despite its great emancipatory potential and whatever moral checks one insists ought to be attached to such thought, radical philosophy will never cease to be dangerous. But if

³⁹ The Gramscian conception of civil society and its significance for East European dissent will be discussed in more detail in the fifth chapter.

democratic politics is to become more than bureaucratic offices and voting, a certain tradition of radicalism is invaluable.

It is precisely at this juncture that Marx's *categorical imperative* proves to be particularly helpful; that is, it serves as a regulative principle for radical praxis within democratic politics. Marx claimed that it was necessary to overthrow all conditions in which people were oppressed and suffering injustices. As was stated earlier, this practical imperative is merely the Hegelian utopia of absolute freedom realized stated negatively. As such, it now serves as the weak-but-fertile ideal for the political level of generality. This ideal is also the logical political extension of Adorno's ideal of subjective revolt. Its power is twofold. First, it challenges political systems that claim to promote and provide freedom and autonomy for their citizens but fall short, and second, in calling for the elimination of suffering it demands that those opposing such condition do not oppress others in the process. In this sense it is sufficiently radical and simultaneously regulates the degree and intensity of this radicalism.

So long as even the most advanced socio-political systems have citizens suffering injustices, actualizing this practical ideal is justified; with regard to democratic politics, it is a necessity. If one were to pose the counter-argument that no system could ever eliminate all suffering and injustice, they too would be justified. Yet, to not strive toward the overcoming of such conditions when one is formally free to do so is a type of political resignation and systemic failure. Thus despite the fact that eliminating every instance of injustice and unfreedom for all time is utopian in itself, the need for this practical liberation-oriented ideal (despite its own utopian character) persists. Otherwise, the

legitimacy of democratic politics as a whole is jeopardized; every citizen needs to feel included and represented in the political constitution, or it will be perceived as a lie.

This applies to both (the former) East and West; whether we are speaking about liberal democracies or the “peoples’ democracies” of the former Eastern Bloc, engaged citizenship and political action are fundamental for the emancipatory political project. It was in large part due to the reemergence of citizenship and radical forms of democratic politics that the debacle of communism in Eastern Europe occurred, and proceeded so smoothly (Tismaneanu 1993). But, perhaps what is more important today is how the lessons drawn from the East European radicalization of citizenship can help us address the problems facing contemporary societies. As Italian political theorist Norberto Bobbio has observed,

[d]o people really think that the end of historical communism (I stress the word ‘historical’) has put an end to poverty and the thirst for justice? ... Democracy, let us admit, has overcome the challenge of historical communism. But what means and what ideals does it have to confront those very problems out of which the communist challenge was born (quoted in Blackburn 1991, 5)?

Bobbio is hardly alone in his concerns; in the following comments, Jeffrey Isaac echoes the above concerns but with a greater degree of specificity. Isaac boils down the contemporary problems of liberal democracy to two issues.

On the one hand, the socioeconomic processes increasingly prevalent in the world relentlessly jeopardize the security, livelihoods, and environments of ordinary people, displacing peoples and disrupting settled ways of life, putting the lie to the norms of legal and political equality so profoundly proclaimed. On the other hand, the political institutions of even the most advanced liberal democratic societies seem incapable of regulating these processes of promoting healthy and effective forms of political participation that might help to arrest them (Isaac 1998, 2).

The analysis and arguments presented in the chapter on the political level of generality offer an answer to the challenge laid out by both these men. By retrieving the forgotten

memory of East European civil society we can look to it for different and effective ways to move beyond the limitations and injustices of even the most advanced liberal societies.

This brings us to the second point: radical thought and praxis can be committed to democratic politics, while not being necessarily bound to its current forms or modes. Although the necessity to limit radical engagement with democratic principles has been discussed already, the idea behind this point takes us in the other direction—toward realizing how radical thought and politics overcome the present limits of democracy. We need to begin with the understanding that a society can never reach a moment when it can declare, “fine, we are now democratic, we have reached our goal.” Democracy is not a condition society reaches, once and for all, but rather is a fluid and fragile experience made up of continuous action and engagement. Robert Dahl wrote that, “[i]n almost all, perhaps all, organizations everywhere there is some room for some democracy; and in almost all democratic countries there is considerable room for more democracy” (Dahl 1998, 119). There is a clear linkage between radical democratic politics and what Dahl called the challenge to *deepen and perfect democracy*—that linkage being the shared ideal of political freedom realized (Dahl 1998, 2).

But as with the theoretical and individual levels, the means by which we pursue a deeper democracy or the overcoming of oppression must be carefully thought out to avoid the mistakes of past radical or revolutionary movements. We are not so far removed from those mistakes as we would like to be; in his 2002 essay *Lenin’s Choice*, Slavoj Žižek celebrates the tremendous emancipatory potential inherent in Lenin and asserts that “violence is a necessary ingredient of a revolutionary political act” (Lenin and Žižek 2002, 259-260). Although one may sympathize with Žižek’s frustrations arising

from the overly aestheticized and de-politicized postmodern trends on the Left, we ought not to abide such blatant disregard for the obvious pitfalls of the Jacobin-Bolshevik type of emancipatory politics. It is for this reason that radical thought and praxis, once again, must be considered only within the bounds of democratic politics.

The East European dissident experience demonstrates practically how this project can be actualized. Through alternative political structures (*parallel polis*) and a new political ethos (*new evolutionism*), the dissidents/citizens went to the roots of what political freedom and democratic politics meant in order to negate their oppressive conditions. While the details of this process will be discussed at length in chapter four, we can briefly point out two significant aspects of this experience. First, those who engaged in dissent (particularly after 1968) proceeded to take the regime's ideology at its word in order to openly present its shortcomings. If communist ideology claimed that one was living in a free socialist paradise, then acting out publicly in such a free manner demonstrated the unwritten limits of what was truly permissible. This revealed the real disparities between the actual political conditions and the ideals that were at their core. In public demonstrations of the contradictions between really existing socialism and its philosophical ideals, the dissidents were able to negate the legitimacy of the regime and its ideological façade. This not only encouraged fellow citizens, but also publicly displayed what cynical apparatchiks knew quite well but refused to admit.

Second, the notion of negation (in terms of liberation) does not always come over well in discussions about practical politics. The counter-argument typically runs that East European civil society proved more than adequate at negating and overcoming the power of the communist regimes, but because of its *negative* character it is insufficient

for grounding new, *positive* or progressive democratic politics. This is a misconception. As we shall see in chapter four, East European civil society managed to negate and displace communist society through *creating* alternative forms of political association—not by one-sided efforts to tear down communist political institutions. Much like the concept of utopia, it is also helpful to understand negation in the manner characterized by Kolakowski in *The Concept of the Left*. Tying it in with utopia as well as practical politics, Kolakowski writes

[t]o construct utopia is always an act of negation toward an existing reality, a desire to transform it. But negation is not the opposite of construction—it is only the opposite of affirming existing conditions (Kolakowski 1968, 68).

Kolakowski tells us that “every act of construction is necessarily a negation of the existing order” and that negation is “merely a desire for change” in the direction of its utopia (Kolakowski 1968, 68-69). He then goes on to explain how this process of negation and creativity is an essential quality of the Left, both in thought and praxis.

In Kolakowski’s statements one finds the answer to the above criticism leveled at negation and East European civil society, as well as the implicit presence of nonidentity at the heart of critical political engagement.

The Left—and this is its unchangeable and indispensable quality, though by no means its only one—is a movement of negation toward the existent world. For this very reason it is, as we have seen, a constructive force. It is simply a quest for change. That is why the Left rejects the objection that its program is only a negative and not a constructive one (Kolakowski 1968, 68-69).

The change being sought may indeed be radical but that does not necessarily mean destructive. The idea at the heart of radical democratic politics is to go to the root of what democratic politics is, put to rout all that currently exists and is deficient, and by doing so create a different, better, politics. By doing so, we are able to respond to Bobbio

and Isaac in a way that is progressively democratic and addresses the problems out of which 20th century communism was born. Such a *negative* process can hardly be confused with a political project that can not ground democratic politics or one that seeks to annihilate it altogether. Furthermore, a revolutionary process of negation that excludes violence grounds democracy in a qualitatively different manner than one which employs violence.

At this juncture, we turn to our third and final point regarding the political level. To restate the point: the political level is where ideas, and the individuals that hold them, both unite and clash; that is, politics, including democratic politics, is about *both* solidarity and struggle. Concerns associated with this point have already been anticipated to a certain degree in the preceding two points. The problems here hinge on the conceptualization and, more importantly, the practice of civil society. It is as civil society that political solidarities and clashes can play out in ways that negate and ground radical democratic politics.

Thus, the concept “civil society” will be re-evaluated from the outset, and will quickly prove to be a problematic category. Its utility as a descriptive term has diminished considerably due to its cooptation by divergent and conflicting political configurations. As a concept, therefore, civil society has become reified and fetishized;⁴⁰ civil society was once a concept tied to an actual historical event and context, but has now been severed from that historical connection. As a free-floating concept it is granted an illusory independent standing, and then is co-opted by other hegemonic political discourses to lend them legitimacy. In terms of academia, it often has been used as

⁴⁰ See Marx, Das Kapital, particularly Commodities, Section 4—“The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof”(Marx 1978, 319).

fashionable buzzword that evokes unreflective praise or respect without really having a definite or consistent substance.

It is for this reason that, although this political project is bound up with civil society, it is also a project *against* civil society. The need to radically re-approach civil society and re-state it as a clear, concrete constellation of institutions and practices is fundamental to this project because East European civil society is “not an alternative to democratic government,” but it is—or at best can be—the continual “reinvention of politics” on the part of its citizens (Barber 1998, 6; Tismaneanu 1993). Part of the argument presented throughout this study is that there is a great deal of usable past latent in the East European experience that can inform our thinking about such a reinvention of democratic politics; East European civil society is, perhaps, one of the most important political aspects of this usable past.

Yet this brings up another significant problem that must be addressed before our analysis can go any further. We must ask if *East* can communicate with *West* on this account; that is, was the dissident experience so unique or culturally specific that it can not communicate its political lessons to the west, or other societies in general? The position taken in this study is that communication between east and west is possible, and works on two levels. First, both eastern (communist) and western (liberal) societies are, ideologically speaking, grounded in the ideas of the Enlightenment and its critics. Whatever deviations and excesses may exist, liberalism, socialism, and communism are “western” ideas with common roots and principles. They all value political freedom, are

concerned with social justice and the welfare of their citizenry, and, except in the most extreme situations,⁴¹ value the individual and autonomy.

Second, on a less general level, there are specific points of friction between the eastern left and western left, which are more productive than they are problematic. But, as Fredric Jameson sees it,

[t]o put it briefly, the East wishes to talk in terms of power and oppression; the West in terms of culture and commodification. There are really no common denominators in this initial struggle for discursive rules, and what we end up with is the inevitable comedy of each side muttering irrelevant replies in its own favorite language (quoted in Blackburn 1991, 265).

The situation, however, need not be considered as irreparable as this characterization makes it out to be. As has been demonstrated to a limited degree so far, and will be clarified to a greater degree later, the critique of power and oppression is not incommensurable with the critique of culture and reification. In their book Eastern Left, Western Left, Heller and Feher describe a few important points of intersection from which a common project can begin, the most significant with regard to the above discussion of civil society and its connection to “the republican dimension of the Leftist tradition” (Fehér and Heller 1987, 47).⁴² Some of the groundwork of this republican dimension has already been laid out in the previous discussion of radical democracy and citizenship; more will come in the following chapters.

With the conclusion of these preliminary clarifications, the overview of the general problematic of the dissertation is complete. The possibilities for continuing the Marxian project by other means are present in democratic politics, and the model for non-

⁴¹ That being outright totalitarianism, which can be counted as something fundamentally anti-Enlightenment.

⁴² This republican dimension of the Left is also evident in the earlier references to Marx and radical democracy.

violent radical thought and praxis is transmitted to us via the legacies of East European dissent. We will find that communication between east and west is not only possible but also quite important if we are to re-think our democratic politics beyond their current limitations. Furthermore, the utopias that are aspired to must be understood as utopias. That is, they are “no-place;” they merely serve to remind us that things could always be better, and the work of emancipatory and democratic politics is never truly completed. It is for this reason that the ideals and practices of East European dissent shine forth to us with Benjamin’s “weak redemptive power.” Their radical democratic legacy glows with the humane spirit of emancipatory politics, and demonstrates how we too are endowed with this power because we alone can confront a present that claims to be progressive and free with its own failings. By doing so, people can shatter its hold on their cognitive and political lives through a critique of even the most basic political categories and practices. Such is the meaning at the heart of Agnes Heller’s attempt to reinterpret the concept of “Left Radicalism:”

One can be called radical if one wishes to transcend capitalism with all its implications, but one should be called a left radical only if one conceives of that task within the framework of formal democracy. A left radical is one who not merely fulfills the role of the enlightener (although she or he fulfills that too) but also acknowledges the reality of all human needs (with the exception of those involving oppression and exploitation of others in the sense of the Kantian restrictive formula addressed against the use of other as a “mere means”), who knows that the knowledge of the intellectual is expertise and that in the selection of values all human beings are equally competent, and who admits that in deciding the problem ‘what is to be done’ no elite can play a crucial role (quoted in Keane 1988a, 133-134).⁴³

This reinterpretation is a direct outgrowth of the East European dissident experience; its achievements lend real gravity to an otherwise abstract notion. Furthermore, through a

new ethos of critical engagement steeped in such ideas the present can be transcended in a manner that opens up new possibilities for autonomy and human dignity in political life, because it refuses to repeat the violent missteps of the past.

⁴³ Heller is hardly alone; Michnik writes: “I once asked Jürgen Habermas, ‘What do we have left of the idealistic faith in the freedom-oriented socialism of the sixties?’ His answer was radical democracy” (Michnik 1998, 321).

Chapter 2: Waking from the Dogmatic Dream⁴⁴ - The Budapest School and *die Aufhebung* of Marxism

Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses. ... It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive towards thought.

(Marx 1978, 60-61)

Revolutionary theory had frozen to a dogmatic cult, with a simplified, easily graspable catechism, and with No 1 as the high priest celebrating the Mass. ...The dilettantes in tyranny had forced their subjects to act at command; No 1 had taught them to think at command.

(Koestler 1941, 142)

But true revolutionary practice depends on the intransigence of theory in the face of the insensibility with which society allows thought to ossify.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2001, 41)

By returning to the ideas and philosophical development of the Budapest School, we peer into a microcosm that re-presents some of the key intellectual developments in Eastern Europe. Their earlier writings give us an understanding of the optimism driving the reform-minded humanist Marxism at the heart of the Prague Spring and Alexander Dubcek's project of *Socialism with a Human Face* in Czechoslovakia (Hegedus 1976). Yet, this hopeful program of socialist-democratic reform was short-lived. After the crushing of the Prague Spring, the Budapest School (still in Hungary) abandoned this self-described renaissance of Marxism,⁴⁵ and began to consider what paths remained open to left-oriented radical thought and praxis (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983). Although the thought of the Budapest School will be historically situated, the analysis that follows is neither intellectual biography nor political history *per se*. There already

⁴⁴ A chapter title from Heller's A Radical Philosophy (Heller 1984).

exist numerous studies that fill both these needs (Arato 1993; Falk 2003; Heller 1999a; Tismaneanu 1988; Tormey 2001). But the question of how the Budapest School's thought, as a constituent aspect of the broader constellation of East European dissent, can help us radically reconsider the Left and democratic politics today has yet to be addressed.

The historical time-frame that this portion of the study deals with is the late 1960's through the 1980's.⁴⁶ It is important to note that the members of this school are only a few of many possible examples of Left-oriented intellectuals seeking to influence political life.⁴⁷ Of these thinkers, Agnes Heller is the most well known, and she continues to be prolific. In all, the Budapest School consisted of Heller, along with her late husband Ferenc Feher, Gyorgy Marcus, Maria Markus, Andras Hegedus, and Mihaly Vajda. Other 'associate members' who were not necessarily critical Marxists, but critical theorists nonetheless, were Gyorgy Konrad, Ivan Szelenyi, Gyorgy Bence, and Janos Kis. The complex web of personal and professional relationships between these thinkers have already been well documented and will not be reproduced in detail here (Falk 2003; Heller 1999a; Taras 1992; Tismaneanu 1988). What will be further elaborated, however, is the Budapest School's shared philosophical development, which offered a critique of the modern world and several ideas about how it can be improved.

The Budapest School's work warrants renewed attention because it serves as a crucial link between western/critical Marxism and the radical democratic alternative that

⁴⁵ As Feher notes, "[i]t was Lukács again (and perhaps not by chance within the Petofi circle, that forum of preparation of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956) who formulated the programme: the renaissance of Marxism" (Fehér, et al. 1983, 290).

⁴⁶ Yet, the events of 1956 are also crucial in the overall story. See (Fehér and Heller 1983).

⁴⁷ There also were Kurón and Modzelewski in Poland, the members of the Praxis Group in Yugoslavia, and Kosik and Svitak in Czechoslovakia, just to name a few.

emerged from the failure of the humanist Marxist reform movement. This chapter is wholly concerned with precisely this link. Although such theoretical upheavals were often spoken of as “revolts of the mind,”⁴⁸ from this point forward they will be referred to as expressions of the unhappy consciousness. This is done to connect, constantly and explicitly, the Budapest School to their distinct Hegelian-Marxist tradition as well as to highlight how they moved this tradition in a new direction.

The awakening of the unhappy consciousness is not merely an abstract or cognitive process. As the epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate, revolutionary thought does not merely float in the air, but is also a material force. Revolutionary thought, however, begins with radical ideas; although such ideas have been used in the service of tyranny, they also reflect people’s efforts to re-make their world, to criticize it, and to imagine how it can be better. With the Budapest School we encounter a specific type of radicalism—Leftist (or humanist) radicalism [linken Radikalismus], which is quite different than radicalism for radicalism’s sake. The left radicalism of the Budapest School included the Enlightenment standards—liberty, equality, and fraternity—but envisioned them as integral parts of a self-administered socialist democracy. Furthermore, the philosophical elements that came together in the thought of the Budapest School are quite eclectic.

The political-philosophical discourse of the Budapest School remains rooted in a certain type of existential Marxism. In other words, the authors base themselves on a Fichtean revolt against reality and claim, in good Hegelian tradition, that they would attain some “truer” reality beyond the present, spurious one. The members of the Budapest School reject any pose of neutrality and raise their voices on behalf of the beleaguered “unhappy consciousness.” ... The case of the Budapest School of thinkers is symptomatic for a group of distinguished intellectuals caught in a political and theoretical deadlock: they continue to

⁴⁸ Please see Aczél and Méray (1960) and Fehér and Heller (1983) for the connection between this concept and the upheavals in 1956 throughout the Eastern Bloc.

practice a sui generis variety of Marxism, something that one could call anti-totalitarian Marxism, but which is nonetheless anchored in the same intellectual matrix they wish to overcome (Tismaneanu 1988, 137).

With the crushing of Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring (1968), they moved beyond even critical Marxism and became harsher critics of really-existing-socialism. But despite the break with Marxism, they refused to abandon their commitments to Enlightenment ideals, their practice of radical political philosophy, and a vision of democratic socialism.⁴⁹

Even before the rise of Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia and KOR/Solidarity in Poland, the thinkers of the Budapest School were championing individual autonomy, human dignity, and democratic-pluralist associations and structures. Similar to Herbert Marcuse in One Dimensional Man (1964), the Budapest School raised the question of authentic human needs; these thinkers demonstrated how in state socialist societies, rather than seeing such needs fulfilled, they were being manipulated by Party apparatchiks and disregarded by the political system. The members of the Budapest School refused to abide such deformations of their ideals, and continued to oppose them in a manner that remained true to the spirit of the Marxian critical project.⁵⁰ One can imagine that Marx's own characterization of this project could just as easily have been written by any one of the members of the Budapest School

“... if the ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present... a *ruthless criticism of everything existing*, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.” (Marx, 13)

⁴⁹ During my interview with Agnes Heller (April 2004), she specifically pointed out 1968 as the “break” for her—after the crushing of the Prague Spring she no longer harbored illusions or hopes of internal democratic reforms. Yet she does continue to stand by the philosophical arguments and concepts in works such as Everyday Life (1968) and Radical Philosophy (1978), explaining to me that good philosophy is radical philosophy. She added, quite humorously, “that necessarily does not make me a good philosopher.”

⁵⁰ In Dictatorship over Needs, the authors claim a ‘critical’ allegiance to Marxism and that they “have to be faithful to Marx’s genuine traditions...” (Fehér, et al. 1983, 292).

The following discussion will demonstrate how these thinkers went beyond Marx's philosophy to re-create Leftist radical philosophy and political engagement. This theoretical analysis also will prepare the way for reassessing the increasingly practical side of the East European unhappy consciousness. Yet, as was stated in the previous chapter, these events are not to be taken as strictly causal or path dependant. While ideas do influence and impact upon people, often moving them to take action, one can hardly draw straight lines through these historical nodes; to paraphrase Kant, *out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made*. This constellational approach, therefore, seeks to represent the dialectic between subjective engagement and objective events, and how the subjective and objective sides of everyday life mutually condition each other. Thus, after a brief introduction of the Budapest School, the analysis will proceed with a more lengthy discussion of their ideas, emphasizing their connections to and divergences from Western Marxism. We shall see that despite the significant move away from Marxist orthodoxy toward radical democratic theory and politics, the thinkers of the Budapest School still remained concerned with the moral values and emancipatory project of the Left.

To summarize concisely the Budapest School's philosophical development, one could say that they moved from *criticism to apostasy*.⁵¹ This change was precipitated for both theoretical and political reasons, ranging from the need to think without the constraints of any single philosophical system, to the political necessity of breaking with and criticizing their own circumstances and prior commitments. Thus, although the members of the Budapest School were gathered by the preeminent Marxist philosopher

⁵¹ This is borrowed from the title of chapter seven in Vladimir Tismaneanu's Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Eastern Europe (Tismaneanu 1988).

Georg Lukács, they did not remain committed to his project of reforming really existing socialism.

Lukács, on the other hand, was to affirm to his dying day “my party, right or wrong” and “the worst socialism is still better than the best capitalism” (Lukács and Eörsi 1983; Taras 1992, 44).⁵² To his credit, he lived his beliefs and remained in the Eastern Bloc despite his temporary expulsion from the Party and the real possibility of his ‘liquidation.’ Even in his most serious utterances of doubt, Lukács did not break with his ultimate faith in Marxism; this is demonstrated in the following two statements, the first made after the crushing of the Prague Spring and the second closer to his death in 1971:

I suppose that the whole experiment that began in 1917 has now failed and has to be tried again at some other time and place (Lukács and Eörsi 1983, 13).

Both great systems are in crisis. *Authentic* Marxism the only solution. Hence in the socialist states Marxist ideology must provide a critique of the existing state of affairs and help to promote reforms which are becoming increasingly urgent (Lukács and Eörsi 1983, 25).

Thus, while the thinkers of the Budapest School may have begun under the mentorship of Lukács and with such a program in mind, the boundless heights of thought and the dismal failures of really existing socialism brought them to very different conclusions.

As we shall see, those conclusions marked the beginning of a new direction in Leftist thought, which broke with much of the tradition’s Marxist past while carrying on in its radical humanist spirit. It is best to quote Feher at length about his own and his friends’ commitment to and apostasy from Marxism.

It was Marx, it can be argued, not his critics and enemies, who made his theory into a “philosophy of praxis,” the truth of which ultimately depends on the realization of philosophy in an emancipated (“unalienated”) new world. And that world which has carried Marx’s name for more than seventy years (no matter, rightly or wrongly), was not the confirmation but rather a devastating refutation of

⁵² Also confirmed in a conversation with Professor Heller.

any philosophy worthy of his name. It has been a world of mass graves, slave labour, general lack of freedom, the cheapest kind of materialism, and universal banalities. Weighed by the standards of “Marxist” society and using Marx’s own methods, Marx’s theory historically proved to be a mere “ideology,” the ideology of a ruthless and ultimately bankrupt industrial revolution. Shedding its tenets was, therefore, at once a philosophical and personal emancipation for the critical theorist (Feher in Taras 1992, 52).

Yet, despite this unequivocal critique and break with Marxism, the thinkers of the Budapest School did not rush to raise the banner of liberalism. Their writings are critical of eastern and western societies, and they generally sought to maintain a continuity with the humanist-critical Marxist tradition while simultaneously surpassing its historical form. What was evident in their political attitudes and theoretical work, however, was a “measured respect for the achievements brought about by progressive forces *within* liberal-capitalism.”⁵³

Before apostasy, however, critical Marxism offered hope for real change throughout the Bloc. In historical terms, critical Marxism is a phenomenon closely tied with the truly sensational event of Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ at the 20th Party Congress in 1956. The denouncing of Stalin, and the ensuing processes of de-Stalinization, made possible the events of the Hungarian Revolution politically and the possibility of internal (immanent) critique intellectually.⁵⁴ In more theoretical terms,

⁵³ Tormey 2001, 1. Although Tormey is speaking of Heller specifically in this instance, I think that the statement is applicable to the other members of the Budapest School as well. In Dictatorship over Needs, the authors make their position even clearer; first, they argue that East European societies are not socialist, and then they claim that if given the choice between Liberal Capitalism and East European society, they would choose Liberal Capitalism. The pluralism and significant increase in freedoms alone would justify such a choice—but they are quick to follow-up their comments that no such choice is possible. In the end, however, it was their belief at the time that capitalism could not be restored in a democratic way in their part of the world, and so “all those whose real aim is democracy have to aspire to a genuine socialism as well” (Tormey 2001, 299).

⁵⁴ For the impact of Khrushchev speech, de-Stalinization, and Hungarian Revolution see Martin Malia’s The Soviet Tragedy (1994), 315-350; Tismaneanu’s Reinventing Politics (1993), 58-61.

Feher explains that a working definition of critical Marxism in countries of really existing socialism can be given by

[first] citing its philosophical postulate that the “ideal project” of Marxist socialism has to be contrasted to its appalling implementation in Soviet-style societies; second, by pointing out its axiom that the “ideal project” contains all the necessary elements of an uncompromising critique of that “reality” as well as criteria for such a criticism; finally, by emphasizing its conviction that no other world-view is suitable for this task (Feher in Taras 1992, 43).

As was already indicated, however, the theoretical and practical program to revive and transform really existing socialism was eventually abandoned—or superceded—in favor of a progressively more radical vision of critical theory and democracy. Thus, moving away from the efforts to democratize really existing socialism (or what they soon came to regard as the *dictatorship over needs*), “the critical Marxists have learned... the perhaps not original but crucial idea that democracy is neither ‘bourgeois’ nor ‘socialist’ but the general technique of the freedom of the moderns” (Feher in Taras 1992, 47). In this light, the task then became to imagine how a new form of democracy could be built upon a critique of the given political conditions.

It is also important to note that their philosophical transformation was not an isolated phenomena, but rather, part of a broader international movement. The New Left, which included theorists and philosophers such as Marcuse, Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, and even Jean-Paul Sartre (just to name a few), occasionally met with the members of the Budapest School at conferences on the island of Korcula; they also expressed intellectual and political solidarity quite often (Heller 1999a, 257-283). But this new *Internationale* was quite different from past associations of Leftist thinkers and activists. They refused to unite for any quasi-mystical messianic programs of world

revolution, and the overwhelming majority of them became outspoken critics of all forms of dogmatics and political violence.⁵⁵ As Feher explains,

The growth of the Western New Left was not only an indication of the international, not merely domestic, relevance of its quest for renewal. It was also a model for critical Marxism's possible new identity as a radical-socialist, but noncommunist, and increasingly anticommunist contingent (Taras 1992, 42).

Thus, out of this new yet loosely predicated unity, emerged new possibilities for Leftist political thought and praxis. These possibilities, furthermore, bore the mark of their historical moment—they were self-critical (and thus self-limiting), non-violent, and pluralistic. As such, one could say that the critical Marxists were the first to heed the century old warning of Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach, "that it is essential to educate the educator himself" (Marx 1978, 144). In his own reflections on the Hungarian Revolution (Socialism of the Gallows), this was precisely what Camus claimed was necessary if the Left was to regain its truly humanistic and moral mission—"doctoring through pitiless self-criticism, exercise of the heart, close reasoning, and a little modesty"(Camus 1988, 171).

This transformation, however, did not lead to radical philosophy or the politics of liberation losing their critical edge. If anything, left radicalism maintained its incisive powers of analysis, and, most importantly, regained the moral upper hand that was lost by the advent of Bolshevism's moral relativism and Stalin's totalitarian reign. The difference roughly fifty years of history made (from 1917 to 1968), was that although emancipatory political thought and praxis still mediated between given injustices and ideal visions of a possibly better future, its practitioners refused to sacrifice their principles and values in an attempt to actualize their hopes. From this critical rupture

⁵⁵ The notable exception was Jean-Paul Sartre; see Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth (1965), preface.

with the Marxist tradition, a new, specifically East European form of the unhappy consciousness was reborn that still carried the founder's original seeds of hope. Yet, despite its historical specificity, this reborn unhappy consciousness also remained true to Hegel's conception; he describes it as a self-conscious

[t]urning away from the empty husks, and confessing that it lies in wickedness, it reviles itself for doing so, and now demands from philosophy, not so much knowledge of what is, as the recovery through its agency of that lost sense of solid and substantial being. (Hegel 1977, 4).

In this "solid and substantial being," furthermore, we find a new hero, who has also come to realize that, politically, he can not be free alone, and therefore, his struggle for freedom is inseparable from the liberation of others. East European dissidents have shown us how such idealistic goals can be pursued with both humility and humanity, and without sacrificing passion. It is from such historical grounds that we can now turn to the theoretical upsurge of this new spirit of revolt in closer detail.

By turning to the work of Heller and the Budapest School, we find how—on the conceptual level—these men and women began to re-think the basic categories of their everyday lives. In doing so, they were able to clear away the reified, dogmatic edifice of the Party's Marxism, via a transfigured spirit of Left radicalism. By working through the concepts of the Budapest School, we also begin working through the sediments of the East European constellation of dissent, learning what aspects of the constellation these concepts reflect, and, therefore, learning more of what the constellation was composed.

The Drama of Everyday Political Life: Setting the Stage

Agnes Heller was and continues to be the most productive and original thinker of the former Budapest School. Although the concepts associated with the Budapest School have been elaborated by all the thinkers previously mentioned to some degree, her work

is the source of most of these ideas, and therefore, will be referred to most often. In a recent interview with Agnes Heller, she confirmed that she still stands by her main categories and arguments, going as far back as Everyday Life. This reassurance lends all the more weight to the drama which unfolds in the writings of the Budapest School. While it is important to note that these thinkers lived, as well as wrote, their philosophy, the drama which follows takes place in the realm of ideas, and is clearly influenced by Hegelian thought. One might even say that it is a variation of his “master-slave dialectic.” The hero of this epic struggle, however, is more Sisyphean in character and temperament, rather than the classic Hegelian image of Napoleon, *the world spirit on horseback*. Although the following discussion is devoted to the theoretical level of analysis, the next chapter will demonstrate how Heller’s notion of the individual came to life as an Absurd, Sisyphean hero in Václav Havel. Havel is singled out because he is both special in his own right, and because he is a *paradigmatic person*,⁵⁶ whose life of revolt and “nonidentity” is only the best known example of similar efforts undertaken by like minded people in Eastern Europe. For now, however, we will focus on the theoretical contributions to radicalism of the Budapest School.

A drama must have a hero, and a villain for him to struggle against. The radical philosophy of the Budapest School, and Heller in particular, casts her protagonist first in the role of an alienated, reified subject—the “particular” person (Heller’s term) as he is molded and socialized by the system. This particular person is alienated from his own possibilities of living differently, and expressing his most radical political needs (autonomy and human dignity). Heller then tells us how some people rebel against this condition and the system of politics that enforces it. Through this rebellion, the reified,

⁵⁶ Please see (Kierkegaard 1987, 262).

particular subject becomes an “individual,” and in doing so introduces plurality and difference against the socially enforced identity that the regime demands of its subjects. The individual, in this manifestation of nonidentity, also opposes the homogenization of human needs that the regime sought to effect in order to control the hopes and desires of its subjects. Through this initial act of revolt and autonomy against the system’s “dictatorship over needs,” the individual also reintroduces human dignity and meaningful political engagement into everyday life; not merely as something good for the single individual in revolt, but as something good in general.

Everyday Political Life

Everyday life is the place from which we can begin to unfold this drama. As a category of philosophical inquiry, everyday life is particularly daunting. The dimensions of this category at any particular moment in time, and in any one particular place, are enough to discourage the most nimble mind. Heller was able to navigate through this maze of power relationships, institutions, politics, and culture, by proceeding systematically through the two generalized forms of subjectivity already introduced above—particularity and individuality. For Heller, the particular person was a way of drawing attention to a political problem that affected people deeply and society widely. As a form of subjectivity, the particular person is understood to be molded by socializing forces into patterns of thought and action that, although man-made, appeared as natural and immutable. The individual, on the other hand, was a characterization of the person who was able to first, become aware of these external and unessential constraints on his subjectivity, and second, to think and act in a way that negated these constraints’ limitations. This negation of constraints was imagined as a dialectical process; it

transforms one's subjectivity by negating certain aspects while preserving others. Her critique is meant as a challenge to those who carry on in particularity, and in doing so reinforce the power of the system over expressions of autonomy in everyday life. As Heller states,

The prime longing for meaning has been described as the subject's longing for self-expression and as the desire to find direct avenue from soul to soul. This longing is constantly thwarted in everyday life (Heller and Fehér 1991, 224).

Through the revolt against one's own particularity, a person would be able to negate the inner effects of heteronomy, preserve what was that aspect of himself that longed for expression and recognition,⁵⁷ and in the process, transform this radical need for autonomy into a humane symbol of meaningful everyday life for others to see and from which they can draw inspiration.

In this sense, Heller would agree with Henri Lefebvre when he states that “[m]an must be everyday, or he will not be at all” (Lefebvre 2002, 127). How he is “to be”—or more precisely, what is he “to become” is the real issue; *either* a particular expression of the system's image of man, *or* an autonomous individual. Historically, Heller finds man at the center of alienated everyday life, and so, it is with particularity that we begin. She explains,

Man is born into a world that exists independently from him. This world presents itself to him as a ready-made datum; but it is in this world that he must support himself, and put his viability to the test. He is born into concrete social conditions, concrete sets of postulates and demands, concrete things and concrete institutions. First and foremost, he must learn to ‘use’ things, to acquire the customs and meet the demands of his society, so that he may bear himself in a way that is both expected and possible in the given circumstances of that society. Thus reproduction of the person is always of a historical person existing in a concrete world (Heller 1984a, 4).

⁵⁷ The politics of recognition have also been theorized and debated in the west. Please see Taylor and Gutmann, 1994.

But this, of course, is the minimum; if they are to be more than mere machines, people must become other than the *reproduced-reproducing* beings whose sole purpose is the maintenance of the social system into which they are born. Opposed to the system's mass production of subjectivity (however diverse it may appear), Heller emphasizes "man's uniqueness, his non-repeatability," declaring it to be an "ontological fact" (Heller 1984a, 9). This opposition forms a highly paradoxical situation and a field of tension. To some extent, everyday life does indeed need to be reproduced, and normalized or rationalized patterns of behavior do facilitate the smooth reproduction of social norms and institutions that can be beneficial to people. Yet, people also desire a meaningful life in which they can express their uniqueness and actualize their human dignity. Heller believes that an everyday life that is void of (or hostile to) the plurality of autonomous expression which results from the flourishing of individuality is inhuman. The efficient reproduction of society for its own sake—and the few who hold power in such a situation—is a home unworthy of men and women.

Out of one's desire to be at home in the world, the unhappy consciousness arrives on the scene. This unhappy consciousness urges people to critically evaluate their circumstances. With the Budapest School, this critical thought rose to the level of philosophy and began to imagine new forms of individual liberation as well as what was best for mankind. But this radical imagination was not merely fanciful speculation; Heller and her colleagues also contemplated how it would be possible to bring this good life into existence (Heller 1984a 268-269). As Novalis said, "philosophy is actually homesickness—the urge to be everywhere at home" (Novalis 1997, 135), and the

philosophy of the Budapest School was nothing other than a thoughtful, passionate voice being raised on behalf of all those who were alienated from their radical needs.

Everyday life, therefore, is the ground from which the emancipatory political project emerges. It is born from the tension between the demands of the social and the desires of the individual. “It is in everyday life” Heller also states, “that human beings are tested as to whether they are—in Goethe’s words—‘grain or husk’” (Heller 1984a, 7).

With regard to her approach to the problems of everyday life, Heller explains,

In spite of its phenomenological approach, the present work is far closer to the so-called ‘critical theory’... And the impetus to argue for the possibility of changing everyday life (and thereby social life altogether) has undoubtedly come from the legacy of Marx and Lukács (Heller 1984a, xii).

Thus, to help elaborate the concept of everyday life, we must take a few steps backwards into the Western Marxist tradition. More specifically, we must find the crossroads at which internal human consciousness and the external social world meet within this tradition of thought.

Both Marx and Lukács assert that it is people’s social existence that conditions their consciousness.⁵⁸ As Marx states in the Theses on Feuerbach, “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” (Marx 1978, 145). Yet, Marx also argues that man is more than this

⁵⁸ The exact quotes from Marx and Lukács are as follows, respectively: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1978, 4); “It is not men’s consciousness that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Lukács 1971, 18). What is important here is my use of “conditions” in place of “determines.” The word “conditions” leaves the necessary room open for active will on the part of the subject being conditioned, whereas “determines” implies otherwise. The problem is rooted in translation. As political philosopher Bertell Ollman explains, that especially in his political and historical writings, “... Marx seldom uses *bestimmen* (determine), preferring to characterize relations in these areas with more flexible sounding expressions. English translators have tended to reinforce whatever “determinist” bias is present in Marx’s work by generally translating *bedingen* (which can mean condition or determine) as “determine.” Compare, for example, the opening chapter of The German Ideology with the German original” (Ollman 1996, 280 fn 23).

ensemble as well. In equally real terms, the social conditioning that man receives from internalizing *the ensemble of his social relations*, or simply his everyday life, is not totally and inescapably deterministic. How else could Marx assert that man makes his own history, even if he does so not under conditions of his own choosing (Marx 1978, 595)? The place of social conditioning, therefore, is also the place of critical reflection, and the self-conscious realization of such a process. As such, it is also the place of revolt (in thought and practice) against the assimilating power of everyday life. We find, therefore, that there are two mutually dependent yet agonistic sides to everyday life that set it in motion. On the one hand, we find the process by which everyday life reproduces itself within and through us, and on the other hand, we find the varied efforts of individuals to understand and free themselves from this very process. While Heller expressed this contradiction in the contrast between the particular person and the individual, the same dynamic is present in Lukács' more abstract Hegelian formulation: everyday life is the identity of identity and nonidentity (Lukács 1975, 74). The process of liberation, however, is hardly a simple task. Lukács lamented, "[t]he path to consciousness throughout the course of history does not become smoother but on the contrary evermore arduous and exacting" (Lukács 1971a, 24).

This path to consciousness (critical self—and political consciousness) is the dramatic storyline of how and why the particular person becomes an individual. It is the rock on which the foundations of a new form of everyday political life was imagined and built. But it is also a somewhat tragic story, and this is why it is perhaps better to imagine its hero as Sisyphean rather than a more perfect mythic conqueror or savior. A Sisyphean hero is the proper harbinger of the weak redemptive power and emancipatory

political project because, much like Sisyphus' labour, the work of autonomy is never completed; it is a constant struggle, and its final, "ideal," Telos can never be reached once and for all time.

Heller and the Budapest School, however, demonstrated how such struggle in the direction of one's ideal could in fact be a noble endeavor regardless of its outcome. They argued that the *pursuit* of autonomy and social freedom itself granted life dignity and meaning, even if the desires and needs that moved a person could not be ultimately fulfilled. Among her colleagues, Heller made the first deep cuts into the reified condition of particularity and really existing socialism with simplicity and elegance in argument, proceeding with questions such as *how should I think, how should I live, and how should I act?* (Heller 1984b). In societies that seek to homogenize and manipulate the plurality of human needs and forms of personal expression, such seemingly innocuous questions are political dynamite. They are the equivalent of the first cries that the emperor is naked.

What Heller and her colleagues sought to awaken and embolden were the critical faculties that the Party and the totalitarian system tried so ruthlessly to suppress and eliminate. The contemplation of one's condition can lead to a re-evaluation of one's needs, hopes, and most painful of all, the revelation of one's illusions and self-deception. Heller, among others, helped to stir up this new dialectic, which challenged people to confront the contradictions between the radical needs socialism was supposed to fulfill, and the Party's cynical abuse and manipulation of those needs. Her immanent critique also brought out the real political passion and utopian longing at the heart of this dialectic, while simultaneously demonstrating how critical philosophy and reason could

mediate between these potentially explosive poles (Heller 1984b, 144). In this way, Heller proves her commitment to limitations in terms of the means-ends dilemma when undertaking the project of political liberation. Critical reason, as an aspect of radical philosophy, “therefore, has to criticize all proposals for action which run counter to the rational utopia and which lead in the opposite direction...” (Heller 1984b, 151). But before our hero can revolt against both the internalized and external heteronomy of the system, he must have some idea about what he is rebelling against and toward what goal he is struggling to reach.

*Particularity, or Life that does not Live*⁵⁹

As the drama opened, we found our hero in a condition of “particularity.” That is, as a person who does not exercise his autonomy as a way of life, but rather opts for the social roles and expressions of needs permitted and produced by the society in which he is born. This characterization, however, is more of an ideal type than an exact description. There are different shades of particularity that Heller identifies, and she reminds her reader that her descriptions are meant to typify trends in behavior that vary from person to person. In terms of this type, therefore, one finds that the particular person either uncritically lives within and reproduces an externally delimited way of life, or the person is aware of the constraints on him and their arbitrariness, but opts to continue living as such due to the perceived consequences of non-conformity (Heller 1984a, 20). To challenge Heller’s clear and self-consciously asserted normative bias, it would be fair to ask whether or not such *particular* ways of life are so unreasonable or dehumanizing. In the best of all possible worlds, such conformity on the part of subjects

⁵⁹ The saying “life does not live” is attributed to Ferdinand Kürnberger by Theodor Adorno in *Minima Moralia* (Adorno 1978), on the title page of part one.

(not citizens, because they clearly have no sovereign power), would seem reasonable and perhaps even admirable. Yet the actual, historical circumstances of particular persons around the globe can hardly be mistaken for “the best of all possible worlds.” Even in societies that are relatively better off than others, real political inadequacies persist. To simply accept such problems would betray the critical political forces that made those societies better over time. In this sense, Heller’s particularistic ways of life demonstrated people’s lack of critical self-awareness in the former instance, and lack of self-respect and responsibility in the latter.

Now that we have given the villain of this drama a name and a face, more has to be said about what particularity does to both people and society. In terms of people’s subjective moral and political lives, particularity is a form of *reification* [Verdinglichung]. With regard to the character of society in general, reified ways of life create and sustain alienated and de-humanized political relationships. This formulation of the problem places the particular person at the heart of the political drama, ascribing to him not only the role through which villainy is perpetuated, but also, implicitly, the part of hero. As the unsuspecting instrument of villainy, the particular person is the reified subject that is reproduced by the system, and he who reproduces the system. Only when this *reproduced-reproducing* person breaks with himself, and chooses to think against his own thoughts,⁶⁰ does he begin to emerge as the hero. But this “doubling of consciousness” comes later in our drama; our would-be hero must first become aware of and rebel against his condition of particularity.

⁶⁰ Adorno writes that *to think against one’s own thoughts* is a definition worth considering, if it were possible to define dialectical thought (Adorno 1973, 141).

Reification is a specific aspect of alienation. Lukács' essay *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* was largely responsible for demonstrating the cognitive and material dynamics of this phenomenon. The more proper but horribly awkward rendering of this concept from German would be "thingification," which does afford the English speaker a little more understanding of the term. Although the present usage is consistent with Lukács' formulation, Kolakowski's clear and concise definition of reification is particularly useful (and in agreement with Lukács):

The transformation of all human products and individuals into goods comparable in quantitative terms; the disappearance of qualitative links between people; the gap between public and private life; the loss of personal responsibility and the reduction of human beings to executors of tasks imposed by a rationalized system; the resulting deformation of personality, the impoverishment of human contacts, the loss of solidarity, the absence of generally recognized criteria for artistic work, 'experimentation' as a universal creative principle; the loss of authentic culture owing to the segregation of the different spheres of life, in particular the domination of the productive processes treated as an element independent of all others..." (Kolakowski 1978, 334-335).

Through this definition, we can get a sense of the far-reaching implications of particularistic forms of life. The particular person is reified—an object made by needs and forces outside of himself—because of either the lack of awareness or strategic acceptance of heteronomy in his everyday life. With the loss of personal autonomy also comes a loss of responsibility, and therefore, lost is the experience of being connected to other people in society as well. The massification and bureaucratization of politics and culture are only the most obvious effects of reified, particular ways of life. The obliteration of political solidarity and compassion for people's suffering and needs are the invisible and arguably most corrosive aspects of this political phenomenon. Reified living justifies indifference and self-defeating attitudes toward the prospects for political

change by reinforcing the perceived immutability of given conditions, however inadequate they may be.

What each of these particular people bring into existence through the ossification of their own critical faculties and radical needs is a condition of self-, and thus political, alienation. Alienation, however, is not a clear or consistent concept among thinkers even within the Western Marxist tradition—and becomes even more complicated when existential definitions of the term are considered. The manner in which the term is developed in Heller's thought synthesizes Marxian and existential insights into a new understanding of this phenomenon. As was discussed in the first Chapter, alienation characterizes how externalized aspects of people's creative powers come to confront them as *alien*, hostile entities. Alienation, furthermore, is both a systemic and individual problem. Heller begins to address and challenge this phenomenon on the level of individuals first, and from there works her way in to the broader political realm.

Heller and her colleagues understood alienation as a problem affecting both eastern and western societies, but they considered it to be a historical problem and not an essential aspect of human existence. In a refutation of the essentialist (Heideggerian) argument, Heller writes

I deny however that everyday life must necessarily be alienated. In the final analysis, the reason for the alienation of the everyday world is not its structure, but those social relationships by virtue of which an alienated relationship of everyday life becomes the typical relationship (Heller 1984a, 257).

Following Heller's lead, it becomes all the more clear that by beginning with the reified condition and relationships of the particular person, we come to learn about the subtle working of alienated everyday life. Within Heller's criticism of the particular person is also her strategy of challenging alienation-in-general. She endeavors to challenge a

specific instance in the larger process of alienation by way of the reified subject. “The reified consciousness,” as Adorno points out, “is a moment in the totality of the reified world” (Adorno 1973, 95).

The Power of Radical Needs

Whether a society *permits the expression of or seeks the suppression of* a person’s radical needs becomes an important indication of the degree of human reification and social alienation in everyday life. According to Heller, radical needs are

...all needs which arise within a society based on relationships of subordination and superordination, but which *cannot be satisfied* within such a society. These are needs that can only be satisfied if this society is *transcended* (Heller 1984b, 138).

Up until now, autonomy and human dignity have been referred to as radical needs; both fall within Heller’s definition, in terms of both the former Eastern Europe and western societies—then and now. Autonomy and human dignity are perhaps the most basic of radical political needs. The former because it is about having power over one’s own life, and the latter because it implies a mutual recognition of autonomy among free people. Although human dignity appears somewhat dependent on autonomy, it is equally primary. A person can recognize the human dignity in gaining autonomy for himself and others, prior to rebelling against his own condition of particularity.

Expressions of radical political needs can be progressive social forces that problematize and challenge the given forms of social and political life. For this reason, the regimes of Eastern Europe—or any system that seeks to control its population—needed to suppress the free expression of such radical political needs. Early on, the members of the Budapest School, among others, thought that the expression of such radical needs in terms amenable to the Party’s Marxist-Leninist ideology could humanize

really existing socialism. As was previously mentioned, this belief and program was abandoned and criticized after the Prague Spring was crushed. Out of this experience and frustration with Moscow's dogmatics and brutality, came a different understanding of really existing socialism. The understanding of the Party's grip on everyday life came to be conceptualized as a "dictatorships over needs" (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983).

The dictatorship over needs sought to suppress—and under Stalin, to eliminate—the free and pluralistic expression of radical needs through the "totalization and homogenization of society" (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983, 289). According to Fehér, this process had a twofold effect on the subjects of this dictatorship: it demanded the *identity* of its subjects with the dogma of the Party, and in doing so, it perpetuated a process of *de-enlightenment* (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983, 194-196). The twofold effect, of course, was not merely an individual phenomenon, but came to largely characterize people's political and cultural life. Furthermore, both of these aspects of the dictatorship over needs came together to create—and re-produce—the particular person. With regard to the relevance of this analysis to western, liberal societies, one need only consider Adorno's writings on the culture industry (Adorno 1981; 1998; Horkheimer and Adorno 2001) or Marcuse's discussion of the production of and subsequent satisfaction of false needs (Marcuse 1964; 1969), which all too often obfuscate and thwart the expression of people's radical political needs.

In terms of the demand for identity within really existing socialism, it became clear that mere reforms of the system would not alleviate the pressure of this imposition. The *leading role of the Party* clause in every communist regime's constitution, and Moscow's zealous protection of this guarantee of their ultimate control, meant that any

substantive deviation from identification with the official dogma was not tolerated. As Heller explains,

...a one-party system excludes by definition all organizations with essentially alternative programs in the field of politics, culture, economy, etc. and with it also the possibility to propose such alternatives. It excludes at the same time contractual relations among individuals and collectives independently of the state. A one-party system oppresses civil society. Its ideal type, its overt (or hidden) goal is totalization, the complete submission of society to the state (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983, 156).

Within this push to suppress and control its population, however, the communist regimes inadvertently lit the slow fuse of their own destruction. The power and impact of even the smallest instances of nonidentity—of the expression of individualist difference and political pluralism—proved to be tremendous against the backdrop of such overwhelming demands. Ironically, some regimes in Eastern Europe were willing to go to ‘unorthodox’ lengths to maintain even the veneer of identity. In Hungary, the general political agreement not to bring up the execution of Imre Nagy and the revolution of 1956, and to “play the game” of public support for Kadar’s regime, was the ransom paid by many for the relatively liberal atmosphere that prevailed.⁶¹

The process of de-enlightenment was a more subtle yet equally pervasive force, which often undermined the possibilities of isolated expressions of nonidentity from spreading more quickly into broader phenomena. According to Kant, enlightenment is the process by which people, through critical thought, liberate themselves from self-incurred tutelage, from the dogmatic mystifications of religion and myth. The motto Kant proposes for the project of enlightenment is “[h]ave courage to use your *own*

⁶¹ Heller explained to me that this act of playing the game—or in her case, not playing the game—politically made all the difference. She described how, although there were individuals more dangerous to the regime than her still in Hungary, she (and her colleagues) was singled out as an enemy because they played the game and she refused. Interview with author, 7 September 2004, New York City.

understanding!”⁶² What occurs under the dictatorship over needs, however, stands in stark contrast:

If enlightenment requires the use of one’s own reason, de-enlightenment requires that one should never use it but should rely upon the collective intellect of the Party which does the thinking, instead of the person’s own intellect. If enlightenment requires that one should reflect before acting and find out whether one’s option is good, de-enlightenment requires that one should never reflect, but unhesitatingly obey the Party. Enlightenment emphasizes personal responsibility, de-enlightenment substitutes sheer obedience for personal responsibility. De-enlightenment ‘liberates’ humankind from moral, intellectual, and political freedom (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983, 195).

The depths of the personal and social reification at work in really existing socialism become clearer when we understand how the Party’s demand for identity is coupled with this process of de-enlightenment. Through this twofold process, the production of particularistic forms of ‘subjectness’ by the Soviet system are nothing other than the alienation of humankind from the expression and exploration of their own needs, possibilities, and imaginations. Heller explains that the radical self-alienation that is produced by this process “has particularly devastating psychological consequences. People not only lose their capacity for thinking for themselves, but have to pretend that they still are. The final interpretation of the dogma, with all its practical implications has to be accepted not passively, but actively” (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983, 195). It is in this sense that alienation is self-alienation; but the active participation of a person in his own alienation also implies that he can challenge it, and perhaps free himself from this process.

In the thought of the Budapest School discussed so far, allusions have been made as to how radical political needs become a crucial turning-point in our drama. It is now time to make this turn and explore the political dynamics it introduces into everyday life.

⁶² (Kant 1999, 263) [Habe Muth dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!]

The re-awakening and expression of radical needs is an axis on which the particular person turns toward the path of becoming an individual. Heller accomplishes this through a re-interpretation of Marx that simultaneously carries her thought beyond the limits of his philosophy. While referring to Marx's notion of human wealth, she is able to step backwards into the preconditions for the creation of such wealth, to reveal the role and value of radical needs.

For Marx here, as on other occasions, the most important category of value is that of wealth; at the same time, this constitutes a critique of the use that classical political economy made of the category 'wealth,' in identifying it with material wealth. For Marx, the precondition of 'human' wealth is only the basis for the free development of all the capacities and senses of the human being, the free and many-sided activity of every individual. Need as a category of value is none other than the need for this kind of wealth (Heller 1976, 38).

It is only the person rich in radical needs, therefore, who can create such human wealth; otherwise, we are still witnessing merely the reproduction of the system's needs via the manipulation of people's radical needs. The needs most important in the context of this discussion are autonomy and human dignity, because they are left unfulfilled by given social conditions. It is through the self-conscious pursuit and fulfillment of these needs that people can begin to create new types of specifically human (and humane) wealth. In terms of politics, this would imply an everyday life in which autonomy triumphed over heteronomy, coercion gave way to persuasive argumentation, and agonistic politics overtook antagonistic politics (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 2000a; 2000b).

The "man rich in needs," therefore, is a philosophical construct meant to offer a critical perspective for surveying the problems facing people in their everyday lives.⁶³ It demonstrates that although the reification of the person and his alienation in everyday life is far-reaching, it is not total—it only aspires to be. In the guise of Marxist-Leninist

dogma, the Party sought to alienate man from all spontaneous social relationships and establish a standardized one-to-one relationship between the Party and each of its subjects. With the process of de-enlightenment, the push to expunge non-conforming thought from the minds of its subjects was the Party's attempt to solidify its demand of identity into a permanent human condition. This was exemplified in the drive to create "homo sovieticus," or the *new soviet man*.⁶⁴ The Party was more successful in its project in the USSR than in Eastern Europe due in part to the Bolshevik revolution being an internal phenomenon, a long tradition of autocratic rule under the Tsars, and the longer duration of Stalinism with Stalin (Malia 1994, 455). In Eastern Europe the combination of socialism being an externally imposed system (in most cases), the usable past of enlightenment legacies in much of East-Central Europe, and the shock of Khrushchev's secret speech meant that the communist dictatorship over needs operated with many irreparable fissures. It is in the space of these cracks in the façade that people rich in radical political needs can begin to raise their voice against suffering and the abuses of the communist regimes.

With regard to the turn, i.e. the revolt against particularity, a philosophical premise that both Heller and Adorno shared is instructive: "[t]he most enduring result of Hegelian logic is that the individual is not flatly for himself. In himself, he is otherness and linked with others" (Adorno 1973, 161). Though they developed this notion differently, this enduring legacy of Hegelian, as well as Marxian thought, sheds light on two aspects of the individual's revolt against his condition of particularity. Subjectively,

⁶³ In the coming chapters we find the "man rich in needs" in his material, existential form.

⁶⁴ In the new soviet man's western counterpart, *homo economicus*, we can find the same process at work—but in a considerably different form. The expression of reified-particularity is the *individualism* inherent in consumer society. This individualism ought not to be confused with Heller's notion of *individuality*.

this otherness that every person is, leads to the reflexive moment in critical consciousness that moves thought to “exceed its bounds” (Heller 1976, 95). As a newly arrived at self-consciousness, this internal otherness represents a break with one’s particularity, and thus the internalized control that the regime exerted over one’s subjectivity. The second aspect of the individual’s revolt leads the particular person away from his subjectivity, and toward the contemplation of his relation to others. What the individual needs is recognition; this requires social contact with an entity other than the one that demands recognition from him, but offers none in return. The Party required each of its subjects to identify with it and, therefore, demanded them to recognize it as dignified and powerful. In return the Party, at best, permitted its subjects a relatively comfortable life, but did not recognize their autonomy and human dignity. But if people wish to express and fulfill their radical political needs, they need others to recognize them. For this recognition to not be one more relationship of subordination and superordination, the others who give recognition must also be autonomous. As Heller states,

The highest object of human need is the other person. In other words: the measure in which man has become the highest object of need for other men determines the level of humanization of human needs (Heller 1976, 41).

Thus, with the adoption of a critical stance toward one’s particular self, our hero begins to chip away at the reification of his own subjectivity and alienation in everyday life. In the process, the effects of de-enlightenment are also incrementally overcome.

At this moment in the story we have before us two antagonistic sides of one political constellation—the emancipatory force of emerging radical political needs, and the dictatorship over needs that seeks to control and, if possible, to eliminate them. These contradictory forces are not abstract entities, but rather represent the conflicting wills of

people and the political system that they created and reproduced. The systematization of everyday life is a phenomenon of modernity, and there is scarcely a “modern” society that does not exhibit some type of systematization. That every system of social and political life is an externalization of human thought and action is not really the issue; the reification of that system against new, progressive—or merely different—externalizations of political life to better reflect people’s radical political needs, however, is a serious problem. In this connection, revolt is not a blind rebellion against all limits, but instead is a passionate yet reasonable challenge to the reification of limits. Certain political and moral limits are in fact necessary for politics to function, but that does not mean debate over those limitations ought to be discouraged or eliminated because they are too important to tamper with. With this said, the clash between these two antagonistic sides of the East European constellation needs to be addressed. It is the climactic moment in the drama, in which the hero fully emerges on the scene—and to everyone’s surprise (or maybe not) he or she was there all along. We, therefore, now turn to the moment in which the particular person openly revolts against himself, and subsequently against the dictatorship over needs.

Individual as Revolt

While the preconditions and dawning of revolt have already been presented, how and why the particular person undergoes this transformation has yet to be elaborated. In simple terms, the individual, according to Heller, is “the person for whom his own life is consciously an object, since he is a conscious species-being” (Heller 1984a, 17). This Hegelian-Marxian formulation mediates between the individual’s critical self-consciousness and the consciousness of himself as a member of humanity as a whole. As

such, he not only begins to re-evaluate his own radical needs but the radical needs of humankind. Through this contemplation, which has already burst the bonds of reified everyday life, the individual realizes that this act of exceeding the socially proscribed and prescribed limits of thought is good “for himself”—and it may be good for others.

Because this story has been about radical needs as much (if not more) than it has been about critical reason, it is safe to say that reason and rationality do not play an exaggerated role in the philosophy of the Budapest School. Heller and her colleagues do not lay all their hopes on the altar of reason, believing that it alone can breathe new life into the phenomenon of revolt and effect the emergence of radical democratic politics. Radical political needs imply the active force of desires and political passion. But since we are concerned with avoiding the excesses of radical passion in this process of revolt, critical reason does play an important role in the progress of the particular person to the individual. Critical reason, informed by historical instances of both political victories and destructive excesses, mediates between the passions stirred up by radical needs and the system/people it revolts against. As part of a critical-yet-moral ethos of engagement and responsibility, critical reason guides the political passions that arise from the expression of radical needs. This expression of ethical revolt, demonstrates that Heller and her colleagues remained ever mindful of the means-ends dilemma, refusing to collaborate in the creation of human suffering as they struggled against it.

It is precisely on this notion of suffering, and its connection to radical needs, that the transformation of the particular person to the individual turns. Marx points out that

[m]an as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a *suffering*⁶⁵ being—and because he feels what he suffers, a *passionate* being. Passion is the essential force of man

⁶⁵ Robert C. Tucker explains Marx’s usage of suffering as follows: [in the line prior to the one quoted, Marx writes] “To be sensuous is to suffer”—Sinnlich sein ist leidend sein. Here “to suffer” should

energetically bent on his object. But man is not merely a natural being: he is a *human* natural being. That is to say, he is a being for himself (Marx 1978, 116).

As was said above, passion does indeed move the individual; passion that arises from the understanding that one's own radical needs are being manipulated and neglected in everyday life. This passion is also fueled by the indignation that arises from the recognition of one's own complicity in this process. In general, the individual's suffering can be characterized as *a lacking*—and the individual has come to understand that this lacking can not be rectified within his given political circumstances. The experience of this lacking on the part of the individual can best be characterized as what Adorno called *angst*. While Heller's description of this experience is not as concise as Adorno's, she appears to be discussing the same phenomenon (Heller 1976, 48, 93). Contrary to a more essentialist formulation of *angst*, which claims that it is a fundamental attitude of human existence (Heidegger 1996, 172), Adorno describes *angst* as “the claustrophobia of a systematized society” (Adorno 1973, 24). In other words, it is the anxiety and discontent that arises from a person's growing awareness of the system's power over his or her everyday life—a power that simultaneously delimits and reproduces subjectivity according to its own (not the individual's) needs. This experience of *angst*, furthermore, marks the initial ascent toward the great climax of our drama. It is at this juncture that the unhappy consciousness appears to the individual, and wakes him from his dogmatic dream.

The unhappy consciousness appears to this contemplative individual like a *holy ghost*, revealing to him the complexity and infinitude of his struggle. But this holy ghost is not some unearthly visitor; rather it is the person's own consciousness—split into two

probably be understood in the sense of “to undergo”—to be the object of another's action. Note the

opposing sides, the reified consciousness and an emerging critical self-consciousness. Through this doubling of consciousness, the constellation of possibility in everyday life is expanded. On the one hand, should the person choose open revolt, he faces the possible wrath of the social and political elite as well as the disdain and resentment of his fellow subjects who have not yet broken free of their particularity. On the other hand, in undertaking this rebellion he takes his first steps toward actualizing his autonomy and human dignity, by choosing it as a value for himself and presenting his rebellion as a symbol of life's rich possibilities to others. What becomes evident is that just because a person under oppressive conditions gains a critical perspective on their existential and political situation, it does not necessarily mean things will change. Thinking critically is not enough; without action we are only interpreting the world in various ways. Nonetheless, the experience of angst and the upsurge of one's radical needs carry with them an agonistic momentum, which helps the individual choose to break-out of the inertia of reified everyday life. A significant part of this rebellious energy is rooted in the idea that one's own revolt is more than merely egoistic; it is also an ethical undertaking which declares "I rebel—therefore we exist" to those who would deny people autonomy and human dignity (Camus 1991b, 22). The individual in revolt is justified in assuming this duty because "[i]mplicit in the summons of 'feel with me in my suffering' is the postulate that the cause of my suffering can be the cause of yours" (Heller 1984a, 10).

Thus, hearing the *good news* echo in his head—that he is more than the Party, or system, or society, permits him to be—the particular person chooses to become an individual by undertaking the project of revolt. The individual could have chosen to do nothing in connection to these new revelations; after all, one of the forms of particularity

transition in the next sentence from *Leiden* (suffering) to *leidenschaftlich* (passionate).

discussed earlier describes how one chooses to carry on as a particular person for reasons of “self-preservation.” To opt for liberation means that one has opted for a struggle that may very likely end unfavorably. In fact, the historical record in Eastern Europe so far had proved the futility of opposing Moscow and Party dogma; and yet, moral and political rebellion continued to thrive. The more specific, historical examples of this phenomenon are the focus of the following chapters. For now, we will work through this process on the level of ideas in order to emphasize the new dialectic between political passion and action that re-energized emancipatory politics.

Becoming an Individual—or, No Time to Waste

“An idea whose time has come” writes Adorno, “has no time to waste” (Adorno 1973, 96). It is relatively easy to glean this sentiment from the writings of Heller and the Budapest School as they theorized about the process of revolt and becoming an autonomous, meaningful individual. “Individuality,” according to Heller, “is a development; it is the coming-to-be of an individual. ... But whatever form concrete individuality, or its ideal, takes in a given age, individuality is never complete but is always in a state of flux” (Heller 1984a, 15). Heller, therefore, characterizes becoming an individual as a historically contingent event that illuminates real political contradictions between a person and his or her society. “A contradiction in reality,” furthermore, “is a contradiction against reality,” and in choosing to rebel against his condition, the individual chooses himself autonomously (Adorno 1973, 145). When Heller writes about this “choosing of one’s self,” she is not merely repeating the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Although one can find some similarities between Heller and Sartre on this matter, Heller’s philosophy goes beyond the overwhelmingly

subjectivist existentialism of Sartre. While Heller is concerned with the individual, she is equally concerned with the externalization of subjective revolt, and the symbolic moral and political role it plays in everyday life. In this vein, she argues that

[s]ubjective rebellion against alienation with the aim of creating an everyday life worthy of man is, in itself, a necessary precondition if man is to succeed one day in overcoming alienation socially, so that a subjectively non-alienated relationship within everyday life will finally become *typical* (Heller 1984a, 258).

Thus, the revolt of the individual is always conceived of as greater than the individual, however beneficial it was to his life.

Criticisms could be leveled against the arguments made about revolt and liberation thus far; perhaps the most damning one being that this revolt and “becoming an individual” is inherently elitist and not an option for most people. Quite often “gaining self-consciousness” as it is understood in the Hegelian-Marxian tradition has been an intellectual affair. Who else has the time to spend reading and thinking but relatively well-off bourgeois intellectuals who have the means to lounge in chic cafes? Yet, without either dismissing the importance of intellectuals or overvaluing them, the case for revolt being made thus far ought not to be deemed possible only for one who reads Hegel’s *Phenomenology* while drinking a bottomless café au lait in Budapest or Paris. By grounding revolt in the experience of angst arising from the self-conscious awareness of one’s own unfulfilled autonomy and human dignity, the project of becoming an individual is possible for any and all. As such, the meaningful life that subjective revolt strives to achieve is “democratic in principle, ... and consciously chosen by men and molded to their design” (Heller 1984a, 268).

But subjective revolt, even if it is democratic in principle, is insufficient in terms of everyday life. As Heller argues,

[t]he consciously chosen and accepted task of those individuals who today lead meaningful lives is to create a society in which alienation is a thing of the past: a society in which every man has access to the social 'gifts of fortune' which can enable him to lead a meaningful life (Heller 1984a, 269)

is also necessary. A transformed emancipatory political project must be able to mediate between subjective revolt and the ideal of absolute freedom for all in practical, concrete ways, lest the well meaning rebels and philosophers inadvertently create another nightmare state. Heller and her colleagues, however, do provide an outline for a liberated politics, even if it is largely theoretical. It can, nonetheless, serve as a starry night by which individuals can guide their rebel ships as they proceed from the aporia of revolt and nonidentity back to the common human shore of everyday life.

This is important because subjective revolt can be a disorienting experience. As we have seen, by choosing to revolt, a person is first in a position of apostasy from himself—he is divided from his former reified, particular self. Such a move is undoubtedly liberating in the sense that he becomes the very meaning of nonidentity, but it can also be terrifying because he does not yet know who or how he ought to be. To deal with this moral and political aporia, Heller continually poses the questions mentioned earlier: *how should I think, how should I live, and how should I act?* (Heller 1984b, 28). By posing these questions to oneself in this condition of nonidentity and aporia, the individual can re-create himself in accordance with his own radical needs. In the process, the individual also helps to create conditions amenable for the mutual recognition of such needs. This is because the individual has realized the value of others, as opposed to only identifying with the Party, the system, and in effect no one. It is only as part of a political life, which permits a plurality of radical needs to be expressed, that

the individual could hope to voice and gain recognition for his own autonomy and human dignity.

Yet, it would take quite a revolutionary leap to go from particularity to a type of political life that approached the Hegelian utopia of *absolute freedom realized*. Such a leap, however is not the order of the day; Heller and her colleagues had a much more incremental process of revolt and political transformation in mind. From what has been said about the subject in revolt thus far, this slow metamorphosis is grounded in the notion that man and everyday life is “by no means identical with empirical existence;” opposed to reified man and alienated life, we have come to find that “reality is not, it becomes” (Lukács 1971a, 203). Finding answers to the questions that Heller poses helps to guide our hero as he moves away from the aporia of revolt and nonidentity and progresses toward becoming an individual.

In his essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” which Heller has claimed to be greatly influential on her thinking, Lukács explains the twofold character of this process of becoming. On the one hand this revolt becomes the first opportunity for the person to articulate his “true self” on his own terms, and on the other hand, the process of becoming is a self-conscious mediation between past and future (Lukács 1971a, 203). In terms of Heller’s questions, by thinking through answers to how I ought to think, act, and live beyond the proscription of the Party or system, there is something “true” about the person that is now brought to light for the first time. As a mediator between past and future, this emerging truth is in no way “truth a priori;” rather, it negates what was considered ‘true’ in the past and replaces it with what the individual now creates for himself—about himself. This ‘truth’ is not essential, but a historically

contingent truth that serves as a symbol of the individual's autonomy and human dignity to others.

Thus, this project of revolt is indeed political, and not merely individualist, because it presupposes the notion that it is impossible for a solitary individual to rebel on the basis of radical needs. Implicit in the subjective revolt grounded in radical political needs is the necessity for others to be liberated as well. People are indeed ζων πολιτικον [social beings], and therefore *need* others as much as they need their own autonomy for a meaningful life. Alone they can be autonomous, but it will mean nothing because it goes unrecognized. With others, autonomy is also an expression of human dignity because it is not merely recognized by others, but is recognized by others who are similarly autonomous and live with dignity. Although this point has been raised already, it is necessary to emphasize its political significance as the discussion shifts to the moral aspects of individuality, and to the Budapest School's formal outline of political structures.

Individual: Moral Political Agent

We have seen how a person can rebel against his own reified condition and choose to become an individual in order to achieve autonomy and human dignity. It is also clear that in this project of revolt and becoming, the individual's fate is bound up with the lives of his fellow subjects. Yet, being clever enough to have learned the hard lessons of historical radicalism, the thinkers of the Budapest School were not content to leave the moral, non-violent character of this revolt to chance. Heller goes to great lengths to address the role of morality in this process of revolt and becoming because she is convinced that autonomy alone can not guarantee human dignity in everyday political

life. To be sure, Heller treads lightly and carefully. Although she has some definite ideas with regard to morality and political engagement, she also does not want to tell people what to think. Heller, however, does wish to assert that part of becoming an individual includes challenging the hierarchy of values that a society accepts as the status-quo. This means that in choosing to become an individual, one stands in opposition to even the given structure of moral and political choice. The individual takes up this agonistic position toward the given hierarchy of values because those values reinforce the illusion that the present alienated society is “good” and “just.”

As an aspect of subjective revolt, moral choice involves the creation and externalization of a different hierarchy of values on the part of the individual. In his radical posture towards reified everyday life, the individual internally re-conceptualizes his existence; externally this takes the form of living according to apparently new values. Substantively, there may be nothing “new” about the values put forward by the individual, but by placing autonomy above “respect for the law” or “trust,” the already existent constellation of values is merely reordered. Nonetheless, such a public stance communicates new truths about everyday life. The objective, ethical face of subjective revolt declares to others that there is hitherto unrealized value in living differently as opposed to the old way.

This ethical display also symbolizes just how far the individual is willing to go in his revolt toward realizing his needs and ideals. The self-defining, and thus self-limiting, instance on the part of the individual in revolt arises from his desire to be autonomous, and to inspire a similar process of revolt in others. The individual, to truly fulfill his radical needs does not want to replace the Party or system, but rather wants to live in a

community of individuals who recognize a plurality of needs and forms of life (Heller 1984b, 180). The individual's externalization of his values, therefore, is not meant to be the proclamation of a new system of rules. As Heller states, "[s]o long as morality remains a system of rules, then of necessity it will also have a heteronomous relationship to the individuality of the acting person" (Heller 1984b, 182). For the moral, autonomous choice of an individual to be an aspect of pluralist society, each individual must proceed from the understanding that "[t]here is no moral certainty. Its mere assumption would be immoral, would falsely relieve the individual of anything that might be called morality" (Adorno 1973, 242). Thus, the existence of many competing and conflicting hierarchies of values may be messy, but the alternative—their homogenization—has only led to oppression and totalitarianism in the modern world.

To mediate between these competing hierarchies and further explain the self-limiting aspect of the individual's revolt, Heller puts forward the notion of responsibility. More than simply declaring to be the *incontestable author of my act*,⁶⁶ Heller's notion of responsibility is not merely subjective, but politically oriented as well. From the recognition that *no social norm of any sort, no concrete duty and no concrete norm* functions as an unconditional imperative, the free externalization of values and norms will always be contentious. This is not necessarily a bad thing; when a person acts politically, he places his values on display. By announcing his values, he places the imprint of his own autonomously chosen self on his way of life. In this autonomous and ethical statement, he also claims responsibility for his values; others see him and recognize him as his choice regarding the proper way to live. But a declaration of values is finite, and thus must exclude or 'demote' certain values in favor of others necessary for

the realization of the individual's radical needs. This exclusion of values, which may be important to others for the realization of their radical needs, becomes a source of temporary but recurring friction. As others also strive to become autonomous subjects, they posit their values and seek recognition from their fellow citizens as well. Because our hero values autonomy, human dignity, and, thus, plurality above all else, and because he is aware of the contingency that underlies everyday life, he is willing to reconsider his exclusion of values important to others (Heller 1984a, 24). In doing so, he remains autonomous while reaffirming his commitment to freedom for all as the ultimate value.

The constant interplay of affirming and critically re-evaluating how one lives, reveals, once again, the Sisyphean character of our hero. He remains free only through the task of constantly re-discovering and re-creating himself by mediating between his radical needs and the radical needs of others. This self-critical check acts as a safeguard against the tendency to slip into reified ways of life or extremism. It is also clear that such an argument is an indictment of the particular person (whether he works on the factory floor, in the Politburo, or the U.S. Congress) who passes off responsibility for his actions in the name of service to the Party or to "God and country." These sentiments regarding freedom and responsibility were shared by Adorno, who much like the Budapest School, alternated his critical gaze from east to west,

[t]he more freedom the subject—and the community of subjects—ascribes to itself, the greater its responsibility; and before this responsibility it must fail in a bourgeois life which in practice has never yet endowed a subject with the unabridged autonomy accorded to it in theory (Adorno 1973, 221).

⁶⁶ Please see Sartre, 1992.

Lest the ever-ardent defenders of liberal democracy accuse these thinkers of only criticizing and not creating, we now turn to how the Budapest School imagined politics could be changed by such bursts of radical ethical revolt.

The Great Republic

If it is not already clear how the thinkers of the Budapest School have moved past Marx's philosophy, then their formulation of radical democratic politics will demonstrate it fully. First, their vision of political life rises up from the preceding discussion of the individual in which he is envisioned as "the democratic person, the moral person, and the creative person" who, as an autonomous and ethical individual, works with others to remake everyday life according to the norm of freedom for all (Heller 1984b, 175). As a general norm rather than a code of rules, individuals maintain their autonomy and benefit from the mutual recognition of their autonomy, which grants everyday political life richer meaning, plurality, and dignity. One can say, therefore, that in Heller's vision of the liberated individual we find the preconditions for a political association "in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx 1978, 491). But the thinkers of the Budapest School knew that slogans were not enough; that is why they offered their vision of the "Great Republic" as a radical but not impossible model for a transfigured democratic politics worthy of the inherent possibilities of humankind. It is within this radical democratic vision of politics that Marx's notion of "[f]rom each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" takes on new significance (Marx 1978, 531).

The Great Republic is put forward as vision of politics that negates and transcends the suffering people endure in alienated and de-humanized everyday life. What makes

this negation radical and ethical is that it is pursued “in the interest of all [and] can be realized only in a solidarity that is transparent to itself and all the living” (Adorno 1973, 204). As an image of liberated politics, the Great Republic recalls historical moments in which people similarly were moved to undertake emancipatory action. Heller and Feher explain that,

[t]his idea was conceived in Central and Eastern Europe in social upheavals at the beginning of the century, and its memory has not completely faded away. It was this idea that fuelled the workers’ councils in Hungary in 1956. It has been revived in the Solidarity movement (Fehér and Heller 1987, 491).

The most important features of this vision of left republicanism are self-management in the social sphere, and the combination of direct and parliamentary democracy in the political sphere of everyday life. Yet, before we explore the details of this radical democratic model, the utopian character of this vision ought to be addressed first. On this matter Heller herself writes that “[a] utopia can be utopian to a greater or lesser degree. The model of the Great Republic is a utopia in the least possible degree” (Fehér and Heller 1987, 187). This being the case, the Great Republic fits the previous chapter’s discussion of how a fertile and rational utopia can serve as a regulative idea for radical thought and action. As such, it exudes only a weak redemptive power. The Great Republic, furthermore, is not the Marxian “kingdom of freedom” that only a cataclysmic world revolution can usher into existence. As Heller and Feher explain,

[w]hen we mention, among the merely logical options, revolution, we do not have in mind bloodshed, barricades, stormtroops. Nor do we believe that revolutions can be prepared by conspirators and underground organizations (Fehér and Heller 1987, 60).

In confirming their commitment to transparent, non-violent radical engagement, they also reaffirm the notion that critical political action must be ever mindful of the means it

employs to achieve its ends, so as to not poison the well from which it later intends to drink.⁶⁷

In Heller's essay, "The Great Republic," we find its most clear formulation; she describes its philosophical underpinnings, the role of political agency, and its formal structure. In terms of philosophical inspiration, Heller points to Kant and Rosa Luxemburg as equally important influences on her vision of politics. In Kant's thought, Heller finds the practical effort to create the proper relationship between the public expressions of ethical life and politics proper. With regard to Luxemburg, Heller admired

her emphasis on the spontaneity of movements, on self-education via participation, her commitment to her idea of councils [direct democracy] and, simultaneously, to her idea of representation, [and] the way she formulated the proper relationship between politics and morals (very much like Kant) (Fehér and Heller 1987, 188).

In this connection, what has been said thus far about subjective revolt and the becoming of the individual is of crucial significance to political agency. This vision of radical democratic politics emerges from "the bottom up" and is seemingly impossible without the individuals that have been discussed thus far. With regard to the formal structure of the Great Republic, Heller addresses the social and political spheres separately. Although an organic unity between these two spheres remains rooted in people's everyday lives, Heller wants to emphasize the details of each, and, therefore, opts for a demarcation between the two.

⁶⁷ On this point Georgy Markus adds, "The ethos of a movement or a party itself possesses a kind of reality. If a radical organization demonstrates a blatant disregard for its own historical aims and its own theory in its external relations (measuring the socialist character of a social system in terms of its military and economic strength as a counterweight to the international balance of power), then such an attitude cannot fail to have consequences affecting its entire internal domestic policy and inner life" (Fehér, et al. 1983, 3).

The social sphere is one of self-management, and is concerned with socio-economic matters exclusively (Fehér and Heller 1987, 197). This means that the individuals who work in their specific institutions are also responsible for managing them, but in ways contrary to the typical hierarchical patterns. Rather, together with overseeing the formation of rules, norms, and values in their institutions, they also have financial stakes in their institutions. The actual details of these stakes, and the exact structure of management is thought to be worked out by the people involved, but people are also thought to approach work with the same sense of ethics that was gained via their previously discussed revolt. The ethos generated by the recovery of autonomy and human dignity carries over into the labour process and humanizes it as well. Thus, in a very practical way, the economy is *democratized*, which is considered preferable, even if a certain degree of efficiency is lost. Efficiency as a value, therefore, is placed lower in the new hierarchy of values than autonomy and democratic control. In a discussion over this notion, Heller remarked that although the current prospects for such a change are slim, the vision's critical power ought not to be dismissed. Furthermore, during the chaotic days of revolution in Eastern Europe (1989), such a transformation was present in the constellation of possibility. As we shall see in later chapters, certain aspects of the Great Republic were already emerging in dissident associations of Eastern Europe.

The details of the political sphere are somewhat more complex and no less radical. Politics proper, or what we can call the democratic state, consist of both direct democratic and of representative/parliamentary type institutions. Civil society is part of the political sphere, but it is attached to direct democratic institutions specifically, and not part of representative politics. Thus, civil society makes up a public realm in which

citizens can come together to argue, debate, protest, form a consensus, or make coalitions. By comprising the public and deliberative aspect of direct democratic bodies, civil society is part of the state—but in no way the whole state (Fehér and Heller 1987, 197). This aspect of the Great Republic is of particular importance, because the ‘civil society’ that came to life in the form of a parallel polis in Eastern Europe embodied Heller’s conception *in embryo*.

Heller even goes so far as to dismiss advocating direct democracy alone as sufficiently constituting the entire state (Fehér and Heller 1987, 192). With regard to the inner workings of this democratic model, Heller explains the interaction between citizens and these political institutions:

The citizenry is no longer a mere nominal sovereign which delegates its powers to the real sovereign, for it delegates certain powers and not others. The decision as to which issues belong to the jurisdiction of the delegated power remain entirely with the citizenry. It is to be discussed and re-discussed in the public domain and eventually decided in referendum (plebiscite). In addition, decisions like this are not to be made once and for all, but in each case separately and continuously. The model operates in such a way that every political issue can be discussed in the institutions of direct democracy if participating members of such political bodies believe that they should be. This is so irrespective of whether the same issues are also discussed in the parliament. The latter can not pass laws without the consent of the bodies of direct democracy. If a conflict between the two sovereign bodies emerges, the issue should be re-discussed in the general public sphere (or domain) and in the public bodies of direct democracy simultaneously, in order to achieve a consensus via discourse (Fehér and Heller 1987, 193).

What should be clear from this characterization of radical democracy is its real distance from Marxian philosophy. What may not be initially clear is the extent to which Heller’s vision of democratic politics anticipates and “builds in” Howard’s call for the immanent critique of democracy. The lengths to which this model of democratic politics goes to overcome the alienation of the citizen from his or her sovereign power, and the degree to

which it affords the citizen the opportunity to wield substantive political power, as opposed to merely nominal power, is admirable by any standards.

But before we come to an end, a little more needs to be said about everyday life in this vision of politics, and the demands such a model places on citizen participation. Heller tells us that this model of social and political life is based on the allocation of “primary rights” to all persons; by primary rights she means the rights typically recognized in western liberal democracies together with what has been said thus far about radical political needs. When considered in the context of this model, everyone can act on these primary rights and potentially wield a significant amount of social and political power “in person.” Yet the virtue of this model is also its weakness. Despite the equal distribution of these rights based on the political conventions discussed above, Heller makes it clear that participation in social or political institutions is not obligatory. This (or any) model of radical democracy can only work if the majority of people involved are willing to participate in political life. Heller explains that “it is presupposed as a matter of course that if people were given the option of deciding their own fate, the overwhelming majority would be ready to do so emphatically and continuously” (Fehér and Heller 1987, 199).⁶⁸ Some critics with a more pessimistic conception of human nature take this assumption as excessive naiveté or unrealistic optimism. The thinkers belonging to the critical and humanist tradition of Left radicalism, however, remain committed to the notion that an autonomous, engaged political life is a good life, and the only social and political life worthy of human beings.

There is no doubt, therefore, that the Great Republic is a utopia. In this theoretical framework not only does the proverbial hero overcome himself and an

inhospitable, unjust world, he helps others liberate themselves (because it is an aspect of his own liberation), and together they create better lives. Out of the project of revolt and emancipation so conceived, a new form of political and social life was envisioned that gave voice to the need for a shared humane ethos and pluralism in everyday life. In less fantastic terms, it was this type of theorizing that Heller hoped would inspire new expressions of political prudence and civic virtue. The Budapest School was trying to address the suffering of their fellow subjects by imagining how their radical needs could be expressed and fulfilled. Thus, when they imagined individual and political liberation, they believed that it was justified to set their sights considerably high in order to hit a mark that may turn out to be somewhat lower. This explains why Heller's radical democratic vision of individual and civic virtue demanded so much.⁶⁹

The Sisyphean turn of the Unhappy Consciousness

The individual has taken on a great burden by choosing revolt; because of this, we can rightfully call him the hero of this drama—even if he is a Sisyphean hero. It is not hard to imagine how Heller, the Budapest School, and any would-be individual, are in some sense, all images of Sisyphus. All these thinkers and rebels, and virtuous citizens alike are caught up in the difficult and burdensome tasks of everyday life, from which they know there is no escape and only limited rewards to be gained. But as Camus said, we can imagine Sisyphus as being happy. In the philosophy of the Budapest School the passionate spark of Left radicalism was rekindled and taught to live within the bounds of a politics that appreciates critical engagement as much as the human dignity of its

⁶⁸ The lesson of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* claims just the opposite.

⁶⁹ "Rational argumentation, civil courage, tolerance, objectivity, respect for a different way of life, civility, practices based on the universal values of freedom, personality and community, combined with the elementary values of decency..." (Fehér, et al., 217).

citizens. The radical lesson to be learned from their thought is that it is important to fight for your liberation, oppose instances of abuse and oppression, and pursue the actualization of your radical political needs, while avoiding the abuse of others in the process. This lesson remains important now, not because it is the riddle of politics solved for all time, but because it lends meaning, dignity, and virtue to life—for one's self and for others. The democratic and moral lesson that emerges from the Budapest School's *Aufhebung* of Marxism is that there ought to be humane limits to Left radicalism if it is not to destroy itself in the process of its realization.

The tremendous gravity that these ideas exerted within the political constellation of East European dissent, as well as internationally within the New Left, should not be underestimated. Heller and the Budapest School were able to take the reified Party jargon typically used to denounce the liberal west, and demonstrate its applicability to precisely the society that was supposed to have transcended such social and political problems. In the model of the Great Republic, Heller and her colleagues were also able to bridge the diverging arguments between eastern dissidents and western radicals, reconciling the former's fight for officially recognized democratic political rights, and the latter's claim that such rights were only formal and not substantive (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983, 5). As we move into the next chapters, we will see how many of the Budapest school's ideas came to pass in some form. Once again, this does not mean that Havel read Heller, and then set out to be the individual she theorized, or that the informal associations that formed the "parallel polis" were planned according to the model of the Great Republic. Rather, by understanding the ideas of the Budapest School as sediments in the constellation of East European dissent, we come to understand how the

actualization of radical thought grew out of this environment. Their philosophy, furthermore, is not only important in relation to those *independent underground groups* that even Lukcas took note of in 1968 during the Prague Spring, but becomes significant for our present political moment as well (Lukács 1991, 13, 68).

With the completion of the theoretical level of analysis, we have come to a better understanding of the radical ideas that were ‘in the air’ in Eastern Europe. The next chapters will demonstrate how those ideas were indirectly metabolized, and, therefore, found their way into the actions of dissidents. Although part of this analysis’ intention is to reveal these connections, there is also another point to this argument. As Heller states,

... philosophy, radical philosophy, has to become praxis, so that praxis becomes theoretical. *The philosopher mediates between what is and what ought to be, not as philosopher but as a person: as one person amongst millions, as one of those who want the world to be a home for humanity* (Heller 1984b, 186).

By tracing the path that radical thought took through the practical world of East European dissent, we can now re-present such radical-yet-non-violent action as theory. By revisiting how radical democratic philosophy became practical in the paradigmatic person of Václav Havel, and later in the politics of the parallel polis, the purpose is to make the dissidents’ radical praxis a real and inspirational theoretical possibility for us today.

Chapter 3: A Paradigmatic Individual - The Sisyphean Heroism of Václav Havel

What? A great man? I always see only the actor of his own ideal.

(Nietzsche 1966, 83)

Heroic individuals can challenge the system against overwhelming odds, people *en masse* rarely do, if at all.

(Fehér and Heller 1987, 56)

Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth—that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that, a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word.

(Weber 1946, 128)

“Every individual is the center of a system of emanation.”⁷⁰

What is self-evident from the analysis of left radicalism offered in the previous chapter is that nothing about left radicalism is self-evident anymore—not its internal dynamic, not its objective form, and certainly not its solid foundation in any essential Truth.⁷¹ And yet, the possibility for radical democratic thought and praxis has been never so primed. So far, we have dealt with radical democratic politics as thought; the political engagement of Václav Havel now will be revisited to illustrate Heller’s individual—and our Sisyphean hero—in more concrete terms. But the intention, once again, is neither political biography nor intellectual history. Rather, the point of revisiting Havel’s activism is to plot a course through the constellation of East European dissent, which reflects the connections between the philosophy of the Budapest School and one of the

⁷⁰ (Novalis 1997, 42).

many manifestations of subjective revolt. Furthermore, we focus on Havel for two distinct yet intimately related reasons: because, as a specific historical person, Václav Havel's project of non-violent revolt inspired people and re-energized politics, and now, his revolt can also become a symbol of radical democratic politics that transcends his historical moment.⁷² In both ways, Václav Havel was, and continues to be, a paradigmatic person.

"The life of a truly exemplary person must be constantly symbolic."⁷³

In one sense, to be *paradigmatic* implies that a person stands out as an example for others. The Kierkegaardian usage of this term subsumes this meaning, but goes a step further; it includes a specific subjective aspect to becoming a paradigmatic person that makes it more than merely setting an example for others. Kierkegaard writes that

[e]very person, if he so wills, can become a paradigmatic human being, not by brushing off his accidental qualities, but by remaining in them and ennobling them. But he ennobles them by choosing them (Kierkegaard 1987b, 262).

Thus, one can say that by choosing and ennobling his accidental qualities, Havel became an example of "individuality" and a symbol of subjective revolt to others. As we shall see, there is something deeply democratic and pluralistic in this understanding of substantive revolt; it declares that one does not need to be an artist, intellectual, or some other cultural elite to engage in radical thought and revolt. A person—any person—can become paradigmatic if he develops his endowments in a way that transcends society's

⁷¹ This is an adaptation of Adorno's opening sentiment in *Aesthetic Theory* (1997).

⁷² That is, his years as a "dissident"—a term he never liked, for reasons that will be clarified later.

⁷³ (Novalis 1997, 26).

proscribed limits, creates something authentic⁷⁴ of himself, and does so without humiliating others.⁷⁵

The concept of the *paradigmatic person* also includes a non-linear temporal quality (one who stands between past and future), as well as a certain ethical character. With regard to temporality, it unites Havel—the historically specific person, with Havel—the transcendent symbol of individuality. This permits us to mediate between the historical significance of his actions and their theoretical legacies. As a paradigmatic person, therefore, Havel becomes a transcendental symbol that can lead others to problematize their own everyday political lives. This is not to say, however, that he (the living person) becomes a reified symbolic form of those radical qualities that we find admirable. Havel—the man—is certainly more than his radical qualities and actions, as his Presidential tenure demonstrates. Rather, we look to a certain time in Havel’s life when he lived those qualities with which we are now concerned.⁷⁶ The point is not to reduce Havel’s life to these ideas or actions, but rather recover them as a living symbol of political thought and praxis. The substance of this symbol is its ethical character; what Heller calls an ethics of personality (Heller 1996).

⁷⁴ Authenticity, and the authentic individual, will be dealt with at length through the course of this chapter. For now, it is enough to illustrate such a person as one who “chooses her own character and she is the one who will remain true to her self as a ‘projection’ in becoming what she is” (Heller 1996, 12).

⁷⁵ This democratic quality follows logically from the equally democratic and pluralistic basis of revolt in people’s radical needs—in the pursuit of fulfilling one’s radical needs, anyone can revolt and become an individual.

⁷⁶ Whether or not Havel ceased being “paradigmatic” in the way presented below after he was elected President is an important question, but it falls outside of this study’s scope. The dissertation’s focus is the impact of the thought, praxis, and politics of the East European constellation of dissent on the emancipatory project of the Left. With regard to the difference between “Havel the Sisyphean hero” and “Havel the president,” even he acknowledges that his life took an odd turn:

When the idea first came up that I should let my name stand for president of Czechoslovakia, it seemed like an absurd joke. All my life I had opposed the powers that be (Havel 1993, xv). Yet, despite the criticisms that can be (and have been) leveled against “Havel the president” for leaving behind the role of the rebel, no one can deny that when the situation arose, Havel took responsibility for the

An ethics of personality strikes the uneasy balance between the recognition of others and an unwavering commitment to one's own autonomy. It does so as an expression of the double responsibility inherent in the pursuit of one's radical needs. To demonstrate how this is possible and not merely a philosophical dream, however, theoretical abstractions must be abandoned for practical, historical examples of how philosophy became praxis and word was made flesh. Heller states that "one must take a paradigmatic case, a single person, a single life, to exemplify its essence and its meaning" (Heller 1996, 11). According to Heller,

[a] person who conducts his life in the spirit of an ethics of personality will always say "yes" to his own life, irrespective of his suffering, his solitude, his marginalization, or his bad luck in all matters that are external to his personality (Heller 1996, 17).

As such, a specific instance of an ethics of personality can become a general symbol to others, which exemplifies the complex substantive aspects of becoming an autonomous individual.

With regard to the ethical spirit that Heller points out, we find a positive materialization of the unhappy consciousness. Drawing attention to the dual character of this radical being, Kierkegaard muses, "[t]he basic concept of man is spirit, and one should not be confused by the fact that he is also able to walk on two feet" (Kierkegaard 1987a, 65). In terms of Havel, it seems that his Left-leaning tendencies are the least radical aspects of his spirit. When one considers Havel's ethics of personality in its totality, it becomes clear that his radical negating/creating power is rooted in his Absurd aesthetic sensibility, and not a messianic vision of total revolution. Although Havel continues to be active (and walk on two feet) today, the ensuing discussion will largely

political changes that he had fought for. The consequences of this choice, to become president, are another

concentrate on his work and engagement as it related to his dissident experience.⁷⁷ By analyzing his Absurd sensibility and experience of opposition, we will come to understand the spiritual and practical renewal of radical thought and democratic engagement that Havel brought to the unhappy consciousness.

Plotting such a course through the life of a paradigmatic person, however, is a complex matter. Thus, after a brief overview of who Václav Havel is (or more precisely, *was then*), and a characterization of his milieu, we will turn to *how* Havel became a paradigmatic person—that is, how he actualized (in his own specific way) Heller’s ideas regarding the individual and radical democratic politics. This is not to say that it is because of Heller’s ideas that Havel acted as he did; the point, rather, is to reveal the indirect connections in a common political constellation that have hitherto gone unnoticed. To assist in the unfolding of these continuities, Heller’s questions (How should I live/think/act?) will form the analytic structure of Havel’s engagement. In other words, Havel’s ideas and actions will be presented as responses to the radical moral and political questions in which Heller grounds her thought.

The Gift of Civilization

Sigmund Freud once wrote that “[t]he liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization” (Freud 1962, 49). It seems, rather that the individual achieves instances of liberty in spite of civilization, and then tries to remake society in a manner that guarantees those hard-won freedoms. Once institutionalized, however, those freedoms often become insufferable limits or unreasonable fetters for those who come later. As cynical as this may sound, the historical record confirms the cruel ironies of political life.

inquiry altogether.

From the struggles for representative governments at the dawn of modernity to the fight for *more* popular representation in those governments, from the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen to the *ongoing* fight for civil and human rights, people have had to struggle *against* prior milestones of human achievement and civilization to realize their own autonomy and human dignity. Our present moment is not different—and neither was Václav Havel’s.

When Havel rebelled against the limits and inadequacies of his ‘civilization,’ however, he did not do so as a leader of a conspiratorial sect, a revolutionary party or with a pistol in hand. His ethos of revolt proved to be even more radical, though certainly Absurdist in character; he publicly faced-off against the Communist regime armed only with the truth about its own hypocrisy and brutality. The face that glared back was hardly as ‘civilized;’ the regime’s imprisonment and harassment of Havel was merely more of the same ruthlessness that Moscow displayed during the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968.⁷⁸ Despite the fact that the Communist regimes’ ideological “mask of humanist phraseology” was stripped by its actions in 1968, its repressive power remained formidable (Michnik 1985, 158). It was against this seemingly unshakeable, brute power that Havel and others undertook a Sisyphean project of resistance. But this resistance must not be understood as arising from resentment. Quite the contrary, it arose from a unconquerable desire to live with autonomy and dignity. Havel’s revolt had a certain Nietzschean quality; he led a “Yes-saying life: negating *and* destroying are

⁷⁷ Havel continues to be an active supporter of Cuban dissidents and of their struggle against Castro’s communist regime. See “For Cuba’s Dissidents,” *Journal of Democracy* 2004.

⁷⁸ Also, Hungary in 1956.

conditions of saying Yes” (Nietzsche 1967, 328). Yet, with regard to Havel, this *negating and destroying* was achieved by gentle hands dressed in velvet gloves.⁷⁹

To his credit, Havel never permitted the regime’s inhumanity to embitter him; even throughout his tenure as president of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic, Havel maintained his Absurdist outlook, and critical, independent mind.⁸⁰ While there is much debate over his biography⁸¹ and political affiliation (more on the latter point later), former Polish dissident Adam Michnik offers an intimate summary of his friend:

Judging by his biography, Havel has always been a man of political moderation. He never succumbed to the narcotic of Communist ideology, but neither did he shut himself up in doctrinal anti-communism. The most precious values of Czechoslovak culture find expression in Havel’s writings—the love of freedom and the respect for tradition, the humor and self-irony, the tolerance and unswayable integrity (Michnik 1998, 148).

But the question remains—how did Havel manage to achieve all this, and is it really an actual possibility open to all people? To become a paradigmatic person in the full sense described above appears to be a difficult task; it will appear as an even greater—yet attainable—accomplishment after we have revisited Havel’s dissident experience.

“Here must you put by all divisions of spirit and gather your soul against all cowardice.”⁸²

Whether we are speaking about Communist totalitarianism before the death of Stalin or the era of “post-totalitarianism”⁸³ after his death, everyday life in the Eastern

⁷⁹ As opposed to the Party’s so-called iron fist dressed in a velvet glove.

⁸⁰ Of course, Havel also had moments of depression, despair, and self-doubt, but overcoming such real suffering is part of why revolt is so rewarding and meaningful.

⁸¹ Please see Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts (Keane 1999) and Eda Kriseová’s Václav Havel: The Authorized Biography (1993).

⁸² Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, Canto III: The Gate of Hell; this is the inscription over the gates of hell.

⁸³ Havel used this term to differentiate between classical dictatorships, Stalinist totalitarianism, and the form it took after his death—especially after Khrushchev’s “secret speech” and the events of 1956 and 1968. For a detailed description of Havel’s notion of *post-totalitarian*, see The “Power of the Powerless” (Havel 1991, 127-124).

Bloc had few truly bright, vibrant moments. As was mentioned in the previous chapters, the Prague Spring was one such instance. The feeling of euphoria that swept through the Czechoslovak populace during the few months of the Prague Spring sparked people's hopes throughout the Communist Bloc. As Michnik recalls:

Alexander Dubcek, leader of the Czechoslovak Communists, and symbol of the Prague Spring, embodied the hopes of democratic evolution, genuine pluralism, and a peaceful transition to a state based on law and fundamental liberties (Michnik 1993).

Dubcek was given the helm of Czechoslovakia by Moscow because the Soviet Politburo believed that he could breathe new life into the flagging economy and, being Slovakian, his presence would placate the somewhat bruised Slovak national sentiment (Tismaneanu 1993, 92). To achieve these ends, Dubcek and the then reform-minded Party hierarchy instituted the "Action Program," along with other policy initiatives. Although the main points of this program seem "counter-revolutionary" given what is known about Soviet society, Dubcek's intent was to transform and strengthen really existing socialism—not to undermine it. The Action Program proposed:

(1) new guarantees of freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religious observance; (2) electoral laws to provide a broader choice of candidates and real freedom for the four noncommunist parties integrated in the communist-controlled National Front; (3) a limitation on the Communist Party's prerogatives in its dealings with the parliament and the government; (4) broad economic reforms to strengthen the autonomy of the enterprises, to revive a limited number of private enterprises, to achieve a convertible currency, and to increase trade with the west; (5) an independent judiciary; (6) federal status for Slovakia; and (7) a new constitution to be drafted by the end of 1969 (Tismaneanu 1993, 94).

It is clear that such a plan for reforming socialism is a break with the totalitarian model. At its core, it was meant to be a realignment with pre-Stalinist notions of what proper Marxist socialism ought to be, that is, humanist and dynamic. Given these changes, the slogan "socialism with a human face" seemed legitimate; but, to play on Michnik's

formulation, in the end what actually transpired was *totalitarianism and broken teeth* (Michnik 1985, 27-28).

Although Havel remained skeptical of the Communist leadership at the time, he recognized that something beyond mere reform was transpiring at the heights of power and in everyday life. In his reflections on the hopeful, intoxicating atmosphere of the Prague Spring, Havel recalls that

[s]uddenly you could breathe freely, people could associate freely, fear vanished, taboos were swept away, social conflicts could be openly named and described, a wide variety of interests could be expressed, the mass media once again began to do their proper job, civic self-confidence grew: in short, the ice began to melt and the windows began to open (Havel 1990, 94).

But as the demands for further reforms of the system from below steadily out-paced the initiatives from above, the rapid changes also hastened the harsh reaction from Moscow and other East European Communist Party leaders (Tismaneanu 2003, 203). By August 1968 the Party's ideological mask of humanist phraseology had indeed dropped; as Michnik rightly points out, the Prague Spring and its repression revealed the "fragility of totalitarian stability" as well as the "desperation and ruthlessness of an empire under threat" (Michnik 1985, 139).

Yet despite the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the reversal of the reforms initiated by Dubcek's Action Program, the spirit of those changes lingered long after their institutional support evaporated. While the specific changes related to the emergence of "civil society" will be dealt with in the next chapter, the legacies of Marxist revisionism and the new ascendancy of non-Marxist theory (phenomenology and existentialism, among others) are of importance here. These intellectual developments stood out in stark contrast against the policies of Czechoslovakia's new First Secretary,

Gustav Husak, which included the ominous “normalization” (Tismaneanu 1993, 134). Much like Kadar in Hungary, the general plan of the Husak regime was to forget that the Prague Spring ever happened, and to return the country and its population to the Stalinist policies of citizen conformity and strict leadership from above. Unlike Kadar’s Hungary, however, the persecution of dissidents in Czechoslovakia was much more spirited, and included frequent arrests, the loss of employment, and imprisonment (Tismaneanu 1993, 116). What was clear to those who carried on in the spirit of revolt was that the

efforts of the communist regimes to revamp their ideological façade cannot conceal one basic truth: the system has not been radically transformed since Stalin’s days, the ideological underpinnings have not been reassessed, and the individual is still held prisoner of the statist-bureaucratic mechanism (Tismaneanu 1988, 134).

Havel had no illusions about the character of the regime and social forces that he chose to confront. Although he chose to rebel and “live within the truth,” Havel did not expect to vanquish communism anytime soon. He and a few others, however, did believe that communism would eventually crumble because it was decaying from the inside-out. Yet, the end did not seem to be on the apparent horizon.

Havel was sure, however, that the conformist pressures of the system and ideology needed to be confronted and resisted. Much like Heller and the Budapest School, Havel understood the system’s drive to eliminate human plurality and enforce a single, totalistic identity on all aspects of life.

Part of the essence of the post-totalitarian system is that it draws everyone into its sphere of power, not so that they may realize themselves as human beings, but so that they may surrender their human identity in favor of the identity of the system, that is, so that they may become agents of the system’s general automatism and servants of its self-determined goals, so they may participate in the common responsibility for it, so they may be pulled into and ensnared by it, like Faust with Mephistopheles (Havel 1991, 143).

For this reason, Havel believed that even if the diverse expressions of resistance and creativity beyond the bounds of the permissible did not bring down communism, they did liberate the human spirit and imagination. By rebelling against the system publicly and non-violently, he became an individual for-himself, and an inspirational symbol to others. Havel exuded a Sisyphean heroism that carried on in the face of an apparently endless—and hopeless—task.

*“From the accidental to the necessary: that is the road of every problematic human being.”*⁸⁴

Turning now to a closer analysis of Havel, we begin by taking a few steps backwards. We return to our hero at the moment before he makes the leap into revolt. He already has felt and reflected upon the claustrophobia of systematized society that thwarts the realization of his radical needs. The angst that shakes him so deeply, also spurs him to reconsider how he has lived thus far—as a reified, particular person, amid an alienated everyday life. Having reflected on his radical needs, their ideal fulfillment, and the possible means for pursuing the realization of their fulfillment, he chooses himself against the system, and thus revolt as the necessary course of action. As was demonstrated in the prior chapter, this decision is nothing short of a radical break with one’s socially constituted self and society, and a leap into ambiguity. This crucial moment, furthermore, is what Heller describes as existential choice of the self—it represents the only certainty one has: the choice of the person one wants to become (Heller 1999b, 227). It is clear from Havel’s writings and public life that he believed to be making precisely such a leap (Havel 1991, 207).

⁸⁴ (Lukács, Soul and Form 1974, 23).

Grasped in its totality, the substance of this existential leap or revolt fulfills the criteria for being a paradigmatic person. Through his revolt, Havel first became a problematic person; he problematized his own existence, and subjected it, along with everyday life, to thorough and radical criticism. In this process, Havel mobilized his ‘accidental’ talents and attributes in the service of this self-critique and revolt. By way of this mobilization, he ennobled his accidental qualities and made them crucial, necessary aspects of his revolt. This is because he chose them as such—not because *History* or *Nature* (or even his philosophical influences) had determined him in such a way. It was not fated that the man with the gift for Absurdist plays would necessarily confront and critique communism—Havel, the gifted writer, chose to use his talents toward such an end.⁸⁵ By grounding necessity in choice, and not in a power beyond the individual’s control, the individual is always responsible for the moral and political character of his revolt.

This point highlights a crucial difference between Havel’s approach to revolt and rebels of past. With Havel we can begin to understand how an Absurd outlook or sensibility differentiated his radical thought and praxis, endowing it with a sober heroism, or Sisyphean character. He understood his art and political engagement as “giving form to something we all suffer from,” and, therefore, expressing “the mystery before which we all stand equally helpless” (Havel 1990, 54). From Havel’s writings, one learns that this “mystery” is the elusive answer to the question of “how does one live a free, moral, dignified life in the face of Absurd existence?” Herein lies the substance of Havel’s existential leap; by offering an answer to this mystery, Havel transformed the accidental

⁸⁵ Havel could have chosen to write plays that glorified State Socialism, the heroism of Lenin, or the endless revolutionary struggle against the West or capitalism.

occurrence of his Absurdist sensibility into a necessary aspect of his paradigmatic rebellious individuality.

In doing so, Havel not only challenged communism, but also unknowingly changed the constellation of possibility for radical engagement forever. The Absurd individual in revolt understands himself and others as finite, contingent beings, which must pursue the realization of their radical needs within these limits. As a self-consciously finite, contingent being, there can be no hope for the absolute fulfillment of these needs—only the constant struggle and striving towards their realization. Since even the temporary fulfillment of these needs requires an autonomous other's recognition (i.e. to realize human dignity), the rebel knows that he is responsible for bringing about more than merely his own liberation. Our hero, therefore, is responsible for himself, and to others. If his revolt actually harms or humiliates others, the recognition of his autonomy that he seeks (and desires) becomes an impossibility. Thus, the ethics of personality immanently unites an ethics of responsibility to this transformed practice of revolt (Heller 1996, 5).

The Absurd: Revolt and Politics

What ought to be increasingly clear from the preceding arguments, is the significance of Havel's Absurdist sensibility. Although there are studies of the Heideggerian influences in Havel's thought, which were introduced largely through his friend, the Czechoslovak philosopher Jan Patočka (Tucker 2000, 135), it is fallacious to call Havel a Heideggerian. Havel constantly displayed an uneasiness with labels, and even occasionally brushed off the existentialist mantle and opted to refer to his project as "spiritual renewal" (Havel 1990, 12). Nor did Havel ever claim to apply philosophical

jargon as part of a rigorous system of logic or metaphysics.⁸⁶ As his friend and translator Paul Wilson notes, Havel urged his readers to derive the meaning of the terms he employed strictly from the context in which it was used. (Havel 1989, 17-18).

For these reasons, the Absurd becomes an arguably better lens through which one can understand the spirit of Havel's revolt and engagement. Although the origins of this Absurdist sensibility also can be traced back to external sources, Havel made it very much his own. He went so far to say, "I have the feeling that, if Absurd theatre had not existed before me, I would have had to invent it" (Havel 1990, 54). Nonetheless, there are instances where various tell-tale signs of existentialism do come through in Havel's work. But, once again, because it is not rigorous, it would be erroneous to place him wholly within one school of existentialism. Havel's humanism and concern with morality disqualifies him as a Heideggerian, and his romantic spirituality clashes with Sartre's thought (Tucker 2000, 146-155). It also would be unfair to characterize Havel as merely derivative of Patocka. While emphasizing the Absurd does draw him into the orbit of Camus, perhaps Havel's greatest influence in this regard is Kafka (Havel 1990,

⁸⁶ With regard to this point, Havel seemed more concerned with using language to express meaning, and not concerned with the faithful or "correct" rendering of philosophical jargon. The following anecdote demonstrates that he was writing as an artist who inspired people to think about the paradoxes in their everyday lives that they often avoided or ignored. Havel writes:

I remember when *The Memorandum* was being performed. The main character, in his final speech, defends his own moral degradation by appealing to the general absurdity of the world and to alienation, which he expressed in the then freshly rediscovered jargon of existentialism. Someone asked me how I'd really meant it—that is, whether I'd seriously meant to defend his moral degradation, or whether I had intended, by making fun of that kind of talk, to distance myself from modern philosophy's revival of Marxism. The person concerned was upset, and I couldn't have asked for a better response. A cliché is always a cliché; there are no "progressive" clichés or "reactionary" clichés; the more "progressive" a phrase is, the less it appears to be a cliché, the more it interests me (Havel 1990, 194-195).

It is also interesting to note how Havel equates "the rediscovered jargon of existentialism" with "modern philosophy's revival of Marxism." This seems to imply that Havel maintained a critical distance from existentialism, and did not employ its jargon as an expression of a unified system of thought.

6).⁸⁷ But, influences and philosophical genealogies aside, Havel is best understood as an independent thinker who synthesized dynamic, radical ideas to make sense of a world gone awry.

Thus, with regard to his *existential* leap, it was important because it introduced a form of nonidentity into the East European constellation of everyday life—not merely because it was *existentialist*. As an instance of nonidentity, Havel not only created dissonance in a political constellation that sought to return to placid unfreedom, but precipitated a transformation in how one could imagine and practice political engagement. While such a rupture marks an emancipatory moment, ironically, it also reveals both the external and internal (self-) limitations of such a radical orientation toward one's existence and everyday life. Havel maintains that his Absurd sensibility is not nihilistic, but it also offers no ultimate or messianic hope (Havel 1990, 54). It seems, however, that such hope may be unnecessary if one instead chooses to create meaning where it is absent or defunct, and oppose real suffering with concrete plans for change. Despite these narrow limits, Havel's revolt set in motion a rupture that the Party's dogma or repression could not repair. However improbable it now may seem that an avant-garde aesthetic sensibility could have had such an impact on actual political engagement—it, nonetheless, did.

An Absurdist sensibility is a way of thinking; it helps one grasp the paradoxes that undermine any moral or idealist position, while simultaneously understanding that one must still make judgments and choices about how to live, think, and act.⁸⁸ This aesthetic

⁸⁷ I would not be the first to see in Havel the image of Kafka's K. finally making it to the castle.

⁸⁸ The centrality of political judgments for democratic politics is point made by Dick Howard in Political Judgments (Howard 1996). His arguments regarding political judgments will be taken up again in the concluding chapter.

manner of reasoning *comprehends a person and his constellation in its incomprehensibility* (Adorno 1997, 118).⁸⁹ In doing so, an Absurdist outlook also thinks against its own thoughts,⁹⁰ discouraging the thinker from believing that he has come to the correct notion or understanding once and for all. As such, it is the infinite perpetuation of thinking—a never ending task from which one can never be free, unless one chooses to live “unfreely” (i.e. as a particular person). In short, one can either create meaning for-himself and the world, or live as an expression of increasingly totalistic heteronomy.

This kind of thinking, therefore, is critical as well as aesthetic. It mediates between the human “appetite for the absolute and for unity, and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle,” while knowing that neither desire can be wholly fulfilled, nor reconciled (Camus 1991a, 51). Yet, in spite of this paradox, the impulse and desire to act, create, and liberate, does not wane for our hero. With regard to the “negative dialectic” that links this uncommon idealism with the Absurd, Havel explains

[p]eople often ask me how my “preposterous idealism” goes along with the fact that I write absurd plays. I reply that they are only two sides of the same coin. Without the constantly living and articulated experience of absurdity, there would be no reason to attempt to do something meaningful (Havel 1990, 114).

The underlying paradox that is revealed through this critical-aesthetic thinking is that although man is the being through which ever new and radical meaning comes into an Absurd world, this world, is an already present and inescapable aspect of the person who rebels and creates new meaning. Rather than creating impasses, however, these

⁸⁹ This insight was developed by Adorno in relation to art; I am applying it to everyday political life—I think it underlies Havel’s Absurdist outlook and revolt.

⁹⁰ As was said earlier, this is how Adorno characterized dialectical thought.

paradoxes can be productive in radical ways. As the rebel grasps this paradox, the critical side of his thinking sets him in opposition to the world, while the aesthetic side reveals this opposition as an irresolvable contradiction. But, to reference Camus once again, we must imagine this rebel—our Sisyphean hero—as happy. It is only through this thinking and re-thinking, that new expressions of meaning, values, autonomy, and the possibility of human dignity come into the world, as tenuous as their existence may be.⁹¹

This brings us to the deepest of paradoxes, and the root of the antinomies that will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter. We begin to understand this paradox by acknowledging that “man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world,” but rather, “[m]an is the human world, the state, society” (Marx 1978, 53). By apprehending this insight, one acknowledges that the social world has no essential meaning in-itself, and that it is people who lend meaning to this world, sometimes endowing it with ‘truths’ that others later encounter as natural or divine. The Absurdist, however, has seen through these ideological and mythological illusions, and has realized (with great anxiety) that *everything is permitted* (Dostoevsky). Whether one wants to call this the *death of God* (Nietzsche) or the *disenchantment of the world* (Weber), it sets up a dangerous, yet inherently open-ended, constellation of possibility. This insight alone, however, is not what sets him apart. It is, rather, his deeply ironic attitude toward political engagement in which his character is revealed. He knows that no essential Truth or standards of Good and Evil exist, and, therefore, any means for achieving his end can be logically justified.

⁹¹ This has much in common with Heller’s reading of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence of the same:
To accept the mythological image of the eternal recurrence of the same with gratitude and gaiety is tantamount to wishing to live one’s life again and again, and never another life... [...] he who shies away from the acceptance of the eternal recurrence of the same or does not embrace it passionately proves (to Nietzsche) thereby that he is alien to the ethics of personality or has failed in practicing it (Heller 1996, 17).

Yet, he chooses to limit himself, despite his deep passion and desire to achieve his goal. The existential choice of an ethics of personality, along with responsibility and recognition of the other, therefore, appears to be the rebel's only safeguard against the more nihilistic tendencies that can arise from such a worldview (Havel 1989, 266-269, 324).

In relation to this Absurd totality, in which human beings are indeed the measure of all things,⁹² we also realize that “the Absurd is not in man... nor in the world, but in their presence together” (Camus 1991a, 30). Thus, while “there can be no Absurd without the human mind, ...there can be no Absurd outside the world either” because human beings are inseparable from their world (Camus 1991a, 30-31). In the midst of an Absurd world, the individual recognizes that he is surrounded by many ossified human conventions (e.g. Party dogma and practices), which lack both essential truth and the weight of conviction; having broken with this world, the individual stands alone. Havel confronts this cosmic loneliness, and asserts that

[t]he deeper the experience of the absence of meaning—in other words, of absurdity—the more energetically meaning is sought; without a vital struggle with the experience of absurdity, there would be nothing to reach for; without a profound inner longing for sense, there could not then be any wounding by nonsense (Havel 1990, 201).

This confrontation is actually a revolt against the dehumanization inherent in both the Absurd world and the individual's cosmic loneliness. As Havel indicates, it is through

Thus, the creative joy that is embodied in revolt is a temporary respite from the pangs of the unhappy consciousness.

⁹² This is meant in a manner that exceeds Protagoras. The old implication in “man being the measure of all things” is that *man* is also he who measures. In a way that moves beyond this position, by grounding the measurable in the immeasurable, we can take this maxim to mean that human existence—with all its infinite possibilities and diverse forms, together with the recognition of each and every person's ability to make and re-make his life—is the measure of all things.

this struggle with the Absurd in communist society that one can bring autonomy, as well as human dignity and, therefore, human solidarity in difference, into the world anew.

Yet, because revolt is not grounded in ultimate Truth or goodness, one could argue that it is always an expression of a person's *will to power*, and can never be reconciled to democratic politics. As such, revolt would have to be abandoned altogether. The only way to avoid consigning revolt to the dustbin of history because of its inherent risks, was *to make certain moral and political limits necessary aspects of revolt*. According to Havel this is achieved by

...an attitude that turns away from abstract political visions of the future toward concrete human beings and ways of defending them effectively in the here and now [...] quite naturally accompanied by an intensified antipathy to all forms of violence carried out in the name of a better future, and by a profound belief that a future secured by violence might actually be worse than what exists now; in other words, the future would be fatally stigmatized by the very means used to secure it (Havel 1991, 184).

Thus, despite the impossibility of rooting these limitations in any essential Truth, Havel believed that such limitations must be understood as immanent aspects of emancipatory political engagement, and be made true through living them. The real character of the rebel's political engagement, therefore, is clearly observable in the relation of his means to his ends.

It is also a little ironic that through Havel's revolt, the Marxian categorical imperative and Adorno's ideal reappear in a much transformed, yet material form. With regard to Marx's categorical imperative (to overthrow all conditions in which man suffers), Havel humanized it by making the aforementioned moral corollary the real, practical means for emancipatory praxis. In a conversation about Marxism and social structures, Havel states that "[t]he most important thing is that man should be the

measure of all structures, including economic structures, and not that man be made to measure for those structures” (Havel 1990, 13). As such, Havel’s Absurd radicalism maintains its edge while not foregoing an internal humanist check. With regard to Adorno, Havel indeed used his subjective strengths to overcome the constituted subjectivity that communist society tried so hard to instill in him. Sitting in a communist prison, Havel discovered the *dialectic of enlightenment* and the process of man’s self-enslavement for himself. He writes that

[a]t the end of this apparent control of the world lies self-enslavement, nothing more: in assuming that he rules the world and has thus liberated himself, man—dominated by his own domination—loses his freedom: he becomes a prisoner in his own worldly schemes, dissolves himself in them and ultimately discovers that by apparently eliminating the barriers to his existence-in-the-world, he has merely succeeded in losing himself (Havel 1989, 339).

Through revolt, however, Havel sees “[t]he emerging ‘I’ [that] gains its first experiences when its longing for the lost fullness of Being collides with the barrier of its own state of separation” (Havel 1989, 337). The “lost fullness” that the emerging ‘I’ longs for is nothing other than the individual waking up to his own radical needs. The “collision with the barrier of its own state of separation,” is the individual’s struggle against his reified existence that has (self-) alienated him from his own possibilities, which lie beyond what is constituted by the system. Thus, as the *subject breaks through constitutive subjectivity*, the individual “is continually stepping outside itself in order to return to itself once more and, through this ‘circulation,’ it inevitably matures—becomes itself” (Havel 1989, 337).

What marks Havel’s revolt as a watershed moment, however, is that he lived these values with the understanding that, in the end, human suffering will persist and human freedom will constantly fall victim to heteronomous conditioning. He writes,

[n]either I nor anyone else will win this war once and for all. At the very most, we can win a battle or two—and not even that is certain. Yet I still think it makes sense to wage this war persistently. [...] This must be done on principle, because it is the right thing to do (Havel 1993, 16).

The fact that Havel accepted his situation as Absurd, and undertook the project of revolt anyway—making it a necessity for living what he called an authentic life—is what endows his revolt with an uncanny and incomprehensible type of optimism. This optimism has more to do with the possibility of people achieving a temporary reprieve from Absurd existence, than overturning such a world altogether. He also believes that this struggle “takes place within all of us,” and “is what makes a person a person, and life, life” (Havel 1993, 16). Such Sisyphean heroism makes Havel a symbol of revolt beyond even the limits of communist opposition and post-Marxist radicalism, yet not outside the constellation of radical democratic politics. As we now turn to Havel’s “responses” to Heller’s questions, Adorno foreshadows the task faced by our Sisyphean hero in terms that Havel would approve: “The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us” (Adorno 1978, 57).

As was said above, Heller posed the following questions as a way toward critically reflecting on everyday existence: how should I live, how should I think, and how should I act? We can look back onto Havel’s life under communism and imagine his replies: one must *live within the truth*, one must not engage in *evasive thinking*, and one must practice *antipolitics* if one is to be at all autonomous and live with dignity. What these responses mean exactly, and in what ways they are helpful to us now, or seriously flawed, will comprise the remainder of this chapter. Although the analysis proceeds with the given order, it is not necessary, but it is a framework that will enable us to theorize Havel’s existential and political engagement.

“Man has his being in truth—if he sacrifices truth he sacrifices himself.”⁹³

Living in truth is as much art as it is ethos; it, therefore, can not be delimited to merely a personal sphere or public space. Rather, it grants a type of “wholeness” to the person who practices this way of life. It achieves wholeness because he who chooses to live within the truth *gains a history*: he becomes something of his own making that is objectively recognizable to others. Kierkegaard contends that “[a] human being’s eternal dignity lies precisely in this, that he can gain a history” (Kierkegaard 1987b, 250). Camus, himself a master of the Absurd, adds that “the staggering evidence of a man’s sole dignity” is found in “the dogged revolt against his condition, perseverance in an effort considered sterile” (Camus 1991a, 115).⁹⁴ Havel gained a history and lent dignity to his humanity, and the humanity of those around him, through the help of his aesthetic sensibility and gift for expressing the paradoxes and inhumanities in which they were all caught.

“Becoming a human being” Novalis quips, “is an art;” an artistic form of life in which one’s “spirit is perpetually proving itself” (Novalis 1997, 65, 23). With regard to Havel, he was indeed proving himself—demonstrating that he was more than what the system designated or permitted him to be. The whole expression of Havel’s art extends beyond the fact that he wrote Absurdist plays. To fully appreciate Havel’s artistic acumen, and, therefore, the full power of his revolt, one must recognize that by *living within the truth*, he lived in a way that revealed and challenged the absurdity of everyday life under communism. That is, he placed the Absurdity of the system on centre stage through his struggle against it.

⁹³ (Novalis 1997, 29)

⁹⁴ Havel was familiar with the work of both thinkers.

In this light, the value of his revolt is unmistakable. The radical energy inherent in artistic creativity was something that even Lenin, who knew something about revolt, appreciated. During the time leading up to the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin asserted that “it is impossible to remain loyal to Marxism, to remain loyal to the revolution, unless insurrection is treated as an art” (Lenin and Zizek 2002, 123; Lukács 2000, 58). Although Havel wanted nothing to do with Lenin or Marxism, like Lenin he understood that only by suffusing his everyday existence with the power and sensibility of artistic creativity, could his revolt become worthy of its larger task: to stir his fellow people with a novel declaration that the emperor was naked. With this initial decision to rebel by living within the truth, Havel began down the path of becoming a paradigmatic person.

According to Havel, to live within the truth, as opposed to living a lie, means that one is committed to an *authenticity*⁹⁵ that must be all encompassing in order to be genuine. While the meaning of “living a lie” will be discussed in relation to Havel’s response to “how I ought to think,” the notion of authenticity is of immediate importance. For the most part, Havel uses the term authenticity interchangeably with living in truth (Tucker 2000, 142). Yet, when one takes a closer look, it appears inconsistent that Havel maintains an Absurdist outlook while advocating authenticity and living in truth. Living within the truth seems to imply that there is Truth after all; that there is some essential standard before which one can either be authentic or inauthentic. Since Havel’s usage of authenticity sharply contrasts with Heidegger’s anti-humanism, moral vacuity, and passivity, we must look elsewhere to explain the passion, creativity, and concern for

⁹⁵ Raymon Aron offers a characterization of authenticity which not only approximates its general meaning among the French existentialists, but seems to reflect much of Havel’s spirit as well: “Authenticity—in other words, the courage to take responsibility for one’s self, one’s heritage, and one’s talents—and

human suffering that buttresses his revolt. Thus, to unfold the enigma of Havel's *truthless living in truth*, one must grasp its unsinkable romanticism. This romanticism, however, is not wholly identical to that of the latter part of the 18th century—Havel's is an Absurd romanticism.

The birth of Havel's novel romanticism probably occurred in the manner already described in the previous chapter; that is, it began as the system squeezed Havel, but instead of causing him to fold, he fought back. By doing so, he achieved a “relatively high degree of emancipation,” which enabled him to reorder his values and goals in such a way that “living within the truth [became] the one natural point of departure for all activities that work[ed] against the automatism of the system” (Havel 1991, 177, 152). Havel never specified the precise form that one's authenticity ought to take; it was not his intention to single out certain people or kinds of engagement as ‘genuinely’ authentic, and others as less so. Rather, Havel states—in terms that echo Heller—that most expressions of authenticity “remain elementary revolts against manipulation: you simply straighten your backbone and live in greater dignity as an individual” (Havel 1991, 176). Yet what exactly makes living in truth “authentic,” and how such living is an Absurdist version of romanticism is not yet clear.

One of the more sensitive treatments of romanticism can be found in the pages of Isaiah Berlin's essay “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” and in his lectures published under the title The Roots of Romanticism (Berlin 1997; 1999). In these works, Berlin traces this monumental event in European thought and culture, and reveals its lamentable connections to the rise of European irrationalism, nationalism, fascism, and

reciprocally—the recognition of the other, the desire to respect him and to help him fulfill himself—these seem to be the two cardinal virtues of *homo existentialis* (Aron 1969, 82).

totalitarianism—both left and right. Yet, Berlin also demonstrates that romanticism, prior to being co-opted to justify human oppression and dictatorial will, offered a “defense of variety, opposition to universalism, [and was] cultural, literary, idealistic, and humane” (Berlin 1997, 213, 225). In short, romanticism, particularly of the German variety that centered on the literature of *Sturm und Drang*, emerged as a deep, radical revolt against the Enlightenment’s overestimation of Reason and the reduction of worthy human life to that of rationally ordered society. Romantics opposed the age’s smothering cult of Reason and the myth of human progress with the experience of human passion and the expression of autonomous, creative will. Against the singularity of truth achieved exclusively by Reason, they promoted the plurality of human experience and creation (Berlin 1997, 208-209).

In this sense, authenticity was everything (Berlin 1997, 229). That is, to be authentic meant that feeling and experience had to be the true ground out of which thought and action arose. Novalis and his fellow romantics, such as Friedrich Schlegel, and even to some extent Goethe, thought that passion was the midwife of the greatest art and authenticity in life. Passion, of course, includes both ecstasy and suffering, and

[f]or the disciples of the new philosophy [espoused by Fichte and Herder], suffering was nobler than pleasure, failure was preferable to worldly success, which had about it something squalid and opportunist, and could surely be bought only at the cost of betraying one’s integrity, independence, the inner light, the ideal vision within (Berlin 1997, 215).

One’s struggle with cosmic loneliness and a debased world, therefore, had become a badge of honor; this was because the romantics also believed that “self-awareness springs from resistance” (Berlin 1997, 225). In a remarkable summation of the spirit of romanticism, Berlin explains that

[t]hey believed that it was the minorities, above all those who suffered for their convictions, that had the truth in them, and not the mindless majorities, that martyrdom was sacred no matter in what cause, that sincerity and authenticity and intensity of feeling, and, above all, defiance—which involved perpetual struggle against convention, against the oppressive forces of the church and state and philistine society, against cynicism and commercialism and indifference—that these were sacred values, even if, and perhaps because they were bound to fail in the degraded world of masters and slaves; to fight and if need be die, was brave and right and honorable, whereas to compromise and survive was cowardice and betrayal (Berlin 1997, 215).

In this characterization, we already can find the connections between Havel's Absurd romanticism and its predecessor. Havel, however, did well to extirpate the notions of martyrdom and death from his romanticism. While reflecting on his years of opposition after the revolutions of 1989, he said that "[c]ommunism was overthrown by life, by thought, by human dignity;" he believed that "it was the only way that made sense, since violence, as we know, breeds more violence" (Havel 1993, 5). Thus, nihilism aside, we can now turn to what was carried over from the old romantics and consider the form it took in Havel's art of individuality.

The most basic connection that can be made between Havel and the romantics is in relation to authenticity. To be authentic, to live in truth, is to be one's own creation and not the product of heteronomous control. The cost and sacrifice Havel is willing to accept in pursuing this authenticity, however, is clearly very different. Havel is unwilling to place respect for theoretical concepts or insights gained through passionate experience above respect for human life. This is because he learned from bitter experience that it was through the apotheosis of the Bolshevik will that he and countless others were made to suffer. Yet, in a plot twist worthy of his own plays, Havel's passion for freedom seemed to spring from the same ancestry as the passion that inspired the system that

abused and degraded him. This is evident in the way Havel describes himself as a man of the left, and, at times, a socialist. On two separate occasions he states:

For me, socialism was more a human, moral, and emotional category. ... After all, there have been periods in history when everyone called himself a socialist who was on the side of the oppressed and the humiliated (that is, not on the side of the rulers), everyone who opposed undeserved advantages, inherited privileges, sponging on the powerless, of social injustices and the immoral barriers that degraded man and condemned him to the status of one who serves. I too was such an “emotional” socialist, and still am today, the only difference being that I no longer use that word to describe my position (Havel 1990, 9-10).

I once said that I considered myself a socialist. ... Rather than expressing any specific convictions, I was trying to describe a temperament, a nonconformist state of the spirit, an anti-establishment orientation, an aversion to philistines, and an interest in the wretched and humiliated (Havel 1993, 61).

The connections between the romantics,’ Marxists,’ and Havel’s non-conformist, anti-establishment, pluralistic, and rebellious ethos are quite palpable. But it is clear that Havel’s concern for others exceeds the romantics in spirit and the Marxists in practice, even if his belief in the need to live authentically matches their own.

Nowhere is this more clear than in Havel’s commitment to pluralism. For Havel, it is not merely about his own authenticity, but about living with others who also live within the truth—their own truths. Along with authenticity, this pluralism has deep, and often overlooked, roots in romanticism. Although Berlin proves to be equally skilled at summarizing the depth and breadth of romanticism’s pluralism, he mistakenly equates it with liberalism (Berlin 1999, 147). While liberalism is not necessarily antithetical to pluralism, it was, after all, synonymous with the bourgeois life and Enlightenment dogmas that the romantics revolted against. It would have been more accurate, therefore, to connect the pluralist legacies of romanticism to the unrealized potentials inherent in democratic politics.

This notion gains validity if we consider Berlin's account of romanticism and pluralism against the backdrop of East European dissent. Regarding the former, Berlin writes,

[w]e owe to romanticism the notion of the freedom of the artist, and the fact that neither he nor human beings in general can be explained by oversimplified views such as were prevalent in the eighteenth century and such as are still enunciated by over-rational and over scientific analysts either of human beings or of groups. We also owe to romanticism the notion that a unified answer in human affairs is likely to be ruinous, that if you really believe there is no one single solution to all human ills, and that you must impose this solution at no matter what cost, you are likely to become a violent and despotic tyrant in the name of your solution. The notion that there are many values, and that they are incompatible; the whole notion of plurality, of inexhaustibility, of the imperfection of all human answers and arrangements; the notion that no single answer which claims to be perfect and true, whether in art or in life, can in principle be perfect or true—this is what we owe to the romantics (Berlin 1999, 146).

Within this summation of the “better aspects” of romanticism, we see how its inherent radicalism and pluralism was re-animated in the spirit of Havel's revolt. The lessons of romanticism can be translated effortlessly into terms that fit the East European constellation of dissent: critique of the Enlightenment's oversimplified views becomes critique of the equally oversimplified and dogmatic version of Marxism touted by the Party. Against the Party's application of *dialectical materialism and its iron laws of history* as both the singular answer to all social questions, and the ideological justification for violence,⁹⁶ a plurality of voices should be heard regarding possible answers to social and political problems. The notion of pluralism, furthermore, becomes the banner under which people can unite together without sacrificing their specific expressions of individuality. As such, it transforms everyday life by holding constant the two

⁹⁶ I.e. in the long run, violence now was necessary to secure the paradise of tomorrow.

antithetical aspects of political engagement: unity and difference.⁹⁷ These insights energized the substance of Havel's art (his Absurd romanticism), which in turn spilled out into the world and became an authentic form of everyday life. As substance and form became indistinguishable, Havel also became the image of a whole, autonomous individual—as someone who lived within the truth *against* really existing socialism.

"We are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things."⁹⁸

In response to Heller's question of how one ought to think, Havel states that one must not engage in *evasive thinking*. This is because evasive thinking leads to *evasive living* (i.e. living a lie), and, therefore, back into reification and alienation. In an essay bearing the same title, Havel explains that evasive thinking turns a person's attention away from the heart of the matter towards something unrelated. But evasive thinking is more than the confidence man's "bait and switch;" it is the means by which people are able to ignore their world, sometimes as it literally crumbles around them. In the essay, Havel focuses on a woman who was killed when part of a neglected building façade fell on her. When the event was reported by the official newspaper, the death of the woman was "explained" by nimble ideological acrobatics, which discussed everything except what had actually happened—that the system could not care for its infrastructure adequately, and such neglect led to the accidental deaths of its citizens (Havel 1991, 10-11).

⁹⁷ Although one can find evidence of such pluralism in liberal societies, it is because of Liberalism's democratic aspect—not its capitalist ethos and structures. The dynamic of competitive advantage inherent in capitalism makes quick work of ideas that are "inefficient," "wasteful," and "irrational" by capitalism's standards. While quite different from communism, capitalism (even as it is embedded in Liberalism), is a system like any other; it has needs that must be fulfilled if it is going to reproduce itself, and thus requires people to identify their needs with the system's needs. As such, it stifles individual expressions of radical needs that conflict with its own systemic reproduction.

⁹⁸ (Adorno 1973, 33).

Evasive thinking, therefore, is a form of alienation from everyday life. “When we lose touch with reality,” Havel explains, “we inevitably lose the capacity to influence reality effectively” (Havel 1991, 14). In relation to subjective revolt, the practice of evasive thinking robs the present-tense of its capacity for being the locus of nonidentity and critical rupture. Havel points out that “between a detailed prediction of the future and a broad interpretation of the past,” such ideological evasions, “leave no room for what is most important of all—a down-to-earth analysis of the present” (Havel 1991, 15). What remains are fetishized words and phrases that evade saying things that would contradict the system’s dogmatic veneer. Thus, evasive thinking actually seeks out the root from which rebellion might grow, and starves it by depriving it of even the words to think and speak about everyday life in a way contrary to the demands of the system.

In this sense, evasive thinking is a much more profound and diffuse problem than it first appears to be; in a practical way, it overtakes the spirit of political interaction, and reproduces itself to the extent that it inundates its historical moment with deception. Nonetheless, even as it aspires to be totalistic, evasive thinking does meet with resistance. Havel describes this war of words and ideas in the following terms:

It is a time of conflict between theory that plays fast and loose with practice, and a theory that learns from practice; a conflict between two gnosologies: the one that, from an *a priori* interpretation of the world, deduces how that reality should be seen, and one that, from how reality is seen, deduces how that reality must be interpreted. In my opinion, how quickly our society evolves will depend on how quickly we can replace the first gnosology—the metaphysical one—with the second, the dialectical one (Havel 1991, 16).

In this struggle, nothing is what it seems; the “metaphysical gnosology” which Havel opposes, is the Party’s “materialist dialectics,” and the “dialectical gnosology” which Havel champions is closer to the critical theory of the Budapest and Frankfurt Schools.

Against the *a priori* Laws of History, which the Party leaders alone are supposed to know and, therefore, can magically deduce what ought to be done, Havel advocates a form of immanent critique. As was said in the first chapter, this form of dialectics compares reality with rhetoric, the *real* as opposed to the *ideals* that everyday life is supposed to be modeled upon, to find where and how the former contradicts the latter. By holding institutions or leaders up to their own standards in order to see where they fall short, a concrete ground for critique and action is established. While Havel is not typically thought of as a “dialectical thinker,” it seems that Ernest Gellner’s claim—that Havel’s ideology- and culture critique has much in common with “Frankfurt ideas”—is not completely unfounded (Gellner 1994b). With this, Havel also moves beyond someone who only lives within the truth; in addition to being an artist of individuality, Havel enters the public stage as a political intellectual.

Whether left or right in orientation, the classification of intellectuals is a contested matter. Antonio Gramsci wrote of “organic intellectuals,” Karl Mannheim introduced the notion of “free-floating intellectuals,” and at extreme opposites Sartre and Foucault championed the “universal intellectual” and the “specific intellectual,” respectively. It is with some reservation, therefore, that the category of the “Absurd intellectual,” is offered as an alternative to the rest, and to describe this under-appreciated political personality. With regard to what is meant by *an intellectual* specifically, Timothy Garton Ash described the Eastern European dissident type as something different from the common sociological categorization—that is, different from a member of *the intelligentsia* (Garton Ash 2001, 127). Rather than being a highly educated visionary who seeks to ascend to

the heights of power to remake a corrupt world, Garton Ash explains that the East European intellectual understands his role as a person

...who engages in public discussion of issues of public policy, in politics in the broadest sense, while deliberately not engaging in the pursuit of political power (Garton Ash 2001, 127).⁹⁹

Although it may seem that the role of Absurd intellectual can only be played by Havel, history demonstrates otherwise. The Absurd intellectual, much like his Frankfurt School and Budapest School relatives, is someone who “refuses to collaborate” and instead chooses to carry on as an unabashed critic of all political systems and power—even ones that share his values. Similarities with Heideggerian phraseology regarding the deleterious effects of technology aside, the continuities between Havel’s practice of “Ideologiekritik” and the thought of Leftists such as Heller and Adorno are undeniable. It is through an expression of his own style of Ideologiekritik, furthermore, that Havel makes his stand against evasive thinking.

Yet, before we touch upon his style of critique, a common criticism of such intellectual engagement must be addressed. Once again, the critiques that Absurd intellectuals and critical theorists offer are themselves criticized as being merely ‘negative;’ that is, these intellectuals offer no positive, concrete plans for others to follow. In response to the reproach: “when you practice criticism, you are also obliged to say how one should make it better,” Adorno replies, “To my mind, this is incontrovertibly a bourgeois prejudice. Many times in history it so happened that the very works which pursued purely theoretical goals transformed consciousness, and thereby also social

⁹⁹ Garton Ash explains that “[m]y description of the intellectual’s role, which is both a Weberian ideal type and simply an ideal, certainly has more in common with the self-understanding of the opposition intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe before 1989; of the pre-1989 Václav Havel (who barely

reality.”¹⁰⁰ Havel does not seem to be wholly at odds with this sentiment, but, as is clear from his biography, he did do more than merely theoretical work and criticism.¹⁰¹ In terms of criticism, however, by speaking out against evasive thinking, Havel was determined to challenge what he perceived to be the communist “culture industry” (his words) that maintained the false world of appearances (Havel 1991, 6). Whether through his art or essays, Havel sought to enliven the spirit of critical social self-awareness. As such, criticism became a practical and creative form of political engagement (Havel 1991, 6-7). Havel tells us,

[i]t is true that I’ve always been interested in politics, but only as an observer and a critic, not as someone who actually does it. (I’m ignoring the obvious truth, which is irrelevant in this context, that criticism of politics is a form of politics as well) (Havel 1990, 8).¹⁰²

While critique may not be a positive form of political engagement in every instance, it surely was in Eastern Europe.

With regard to the Absurd intellectual specifically, we find a person who creates social dissonance, disrupting evasive thinking and living, and, therefore, the cross-fertilization of “vacuous verbal balancing acts” in which both apparatchiks and cynics have become ensnared (Havel 1991, 14). Evasive thinking had become so pervasive that even the Party was not free from its need to lie. Havel pointed out that it had to falsify everything to make all the pieces of really existing socialism fit: “It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to

qualified as an ‘intellectual’ in communist sociology, since he has scant formal higher education and for a time did manual labour”... (Garton Ash 2001, 127).

¹⁰⁰ As quoted by Žižek in his essay “Lenin’s Choice,” in *Revolution at the Gates* (Lenin and Žižek 2002, 170). It seems to be more than just a bourgeois prejudice. Lukács also was not pleased by the Frankfurt School’s refusal to collaborate; he claimed that they, and those like them, had chosen to check into the “Grand Hotel Abyss,” from which they could comfortably observe the abyss, critically comment on it, but refrain from taking the leap into it (Lukács 1971, 22).

¹⁰¹ Charter 77 and becoming president are only two obvious examples.

pretend nothing” (Havel 1991, 136). But, as Havel points out, believing the lies is not even necessary—playing the game is enough for the system to function.

Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence... 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 (Havel 1991, 136).

By disrupting the flow of evasive thinking and living that alienated individuals, Havel encouraged people to re-discover and express their suppressed radical needs. “In everyone” he claimed, “there is some longing for humanity’s rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence” (Havel 1991, 145). This transcendence was by no means mystical or utopian, but rather proceeded from a sober critique of the given political and social conditions toward solutions that, however radical they may have been, did not include violent insurrection.

While this position undoubtedly locates Havel within the gamut critical intellectuals, we must now consider how being an Absurd intellectual differentiates him from other critical, left-oriented intellectuals. Havel often described his vantage point as *below* or *outside*—as a *stranger*—in society. The “stranger” reference is a deliberate connection to Camus’ great novel, which Havel very much admired. In prison when he read it, Havel identified with the novel’s message so deeply, that in a letter to his wife, Olga, he conveyed “that I too might have written it, or even that I did write it myself” (Havel 1989, 118). Perhaps this was because he understood, in a sense, that he and Meursault had committed and been jailed for the same crime. Havel writes

¹⁰² The irony of Havel’s statement is also worth noting—Havel was president at the time.

[t]he stranger is not a man without responsibilities, he is merely a man who refuses to conform to conventional order, i.e. to the conventional structure of duties, and he feels obligated to accept only those duties that are an authentic expression of his own sense of responsibility. He is not executed for what he did, but for refusing to conform.

With Havel, however, even before he leapt into revolt, his *bourgeois origins* made him a stranger to socialism and so an *objective enemy* in the eyes of the regime. Yet despite being a stranger objectively, we must keep in mind that he chose to rebel—to say ‘yes’ to his marginalization—and, therefore, ennoble it in the service of communist opposition and human liberation.

It is precisely Havel’s vision of human liberation that justifies bestowing the Absurd prefix to his intellectual status. This vision of liberation, which fans the flames of his radicalism, quite ironically “springs from the soil of a clear-sighted awareness of the temporality and ephemerality of everything human. [...] The outlines of genuine meaning can only be perceived from the bottom of absurdity” (Havel 1990, 113). These two sides of his intellectual work come together to explode not only the communist system, but also all previous conceptions of radical critique that claimed violence was necessary for liberation. Thus, in the face of Absurd existence, Havel is unwilling to grin and bear the inhumanities of the present, and equally unwilling to struggle for a better tomorrow at the expense of human lives today. Then, one may ask, what is to be done? To that end Havel replies,

... anyone who claims that I am a dreamer who expects to transform hell into heaven is wrong. I have few illusions. But I feel a responsibility to work towards the things I consider good and right. I don’t know whether I’ll be able to change certain things for the better, or not at all, both outcomes are possible. There is only one thing I will not concede: that it might be meaningless to strive in a good cause (Havel 1993, 17).

Actually, it is in opposition to a meaningless, reified, existence that one engages in revolt; in this particular case, revolt takes the form of criticism. With regard to Havel, it is nothing short of an expression of his Absurdist ethics of personality, which even if it “has no hope of any immediate and visible political effect can gradually and indirectly, over time, gain in political significance” (Havel 1990, 114-115).

This intellectual attitude toward revolt is the polar opposite of the attitude more typically associated with critical intellectuals—an attitude Adorno called “idealism as rage” (Adorno 1973, 22-24). The notion is meant to reflect the utopian desires of intellectuals who seek the great apocalyptic revolutionary event—springing from their ideas about the world and its problems—which, once pursued, will order the chaos of existence, righting all wrongs, once and for all. Those who have conceived of such idealistic totalities for humanity, typically have also considered no sacrifice too great for achieving this ultimate end—including littering the road to this kingdom of freedom and reason with corpses. Adorno conveys the hidden motive of this kind of idealism in Minima Moralia: “The attempt to deduce the world from a principle, is the behavior of someone who would like to usurp power instead of resisting it” (Adorno 1978, 89). Such nihilistic “idealism” of prior radical intellectuals often has been nothing more than their desire to re-create the world according to their own will. In terms of existentialism, Sartre called this *the desire to be God* (Sartre 1992, 724). In the end, the idealism that rages against a cruel and irrational world, and seeks to transcend it, only achieves the institutionalization of some new form of misanthropy. Such rage, therefore, proves to be impotent because nothing substantive changes.

The Absurd intellectual has already sidestepped many of the pitfalls of this idealism through his commitment to pluralism and responsibility to others. This has as much to do with existential choice as it does with the fusion of the Absurd with revolt. As we have already observed with romanticism, the Absurd acts as a balm to cure the idealist's soul. Both the romantic's and utopian intellectual's spirit is a bleeding wound, driven by an almost insatiable desire to oppose the abuses and suffering of the given world and found a just one in its place. The Absurd, however, reveals to him that such a desire, such a hope is an illusion, and to force an in compliant world into such a gilded cage is an expression of inhumanity and nihilism. As Havel demonstrates, there are other ways to pursue the same goals, which avoid the traps of nihilism and rage; he exemplifies how one can be a radical intellectual who negates without annihilating human life. Havel explains how this was possible under communism, illustrating such a position's dynamic energy and seemingly paradoxical character:

The almost aggressive energy with which I'm constantly trying to capture all this, either in play writing or other ways—an energy that not only drives me to get involved in things and occasionally to burn my fingers (and I am even willing to go fling myself in prison for my cause), but also makes me appear to many (it is not my place to say whether rightly or wrongly) as a ruthless debunker, a fearless demystifier, if not a radical and a rebel—that energy may seem paradoxical and incomprehensible... [...] Actually, however, there isn't much of a contradiction at all; in fact these things may well belong together (Havel 1989, 288).

Indeed this “contradiction” is the rub that makes the Absurd intellectual a new type of radical. The experience of absurdity, as Havel has expressed it, is not a kind of defeatism that uses the inherent meaninglessness of the world as an excuse for apathy or nihilism. It is, rather, the reverse: “only someone whose very being thirsts after meaning, for whom ‘meaning’ is an integral dimension of his own existence, can experience the absence of meaning as something painful, or more precisely, can perceive it at all” (Havel 1989,

177). Thus the experience of absurdity becomes the *groundless ground* upon which it is possible to critique conditions as they are (because they *need* not be this way, and can be otherwise), and because a meaningful existence and human ends are not preordained or “discovered at all, but made, not found but created” (Berlin 1997, 227).

Then how do we ultimately characterize the Absurd intellectual? In the first place, it is clear that while the revolt of the Absurd intellectual aims at certain results, his value and authenticity are not dependent on their realization—the *all or nothing* criteria for success has been exposed as unnecessarily self-destructive. Second, while the Absurd intellectual begins with a form of immanent critique, he takes this a step further by contesting even the ideals (as they are understood presently) that reality is measured against. But even if the Absurd intellectual was to win the day and, like Havel, breakthrough his constitutive subjectivity *and* overcome the system, his chosen vocation dooms him to remain an outsider—the perpetual stranger suffering from cosmic loneliness. This is because,

... the role of the intellectual is to warn, to predict horrors, to be a Cassandra who tells us what is going on outside of the walls of the city. ... I too think that the intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be a witness to their mendacity. For this reason an intellectual cannot fit into any role that might be assigned to him, nor can he ever be made to fit into any of the histories written by the victors. An intellectual essentially doesn't belong anywhere; he stands out as an irritant wherever he is; he does not fit into any pigeonhole completely. ... An intellectual is always at odds with hard and fast categories, because these tend to be instruments used by the victors. ... The notion of the vanquished, however, is more complicated. Yes, to a certain extent an intellectual is always condemned to defeat. He is like Sisyphus in that regard. And there is always something suspect about an intellectual on the winning side. And yet in another, more profound sense the intellectual remains, despite all his defeats, undefeated- again like Sisyphus. He is in fact victorious through his defeats. His position, therefore, is

ambiguous. Not to admit that such an ambiguity exists could ultimately mean accepting a place in history as written by the victors (Havel 1990, 166-167).¹⁰³

With this, the two irreconcilable sides of our Sisyphean hero are revealed in their wholeness. On the one hand we have the Absurd romantic intellectual, who yearns to live in truth and expose lies as an expression of his creative power. As such, he is a tragic figure who must *suffer all the torments of loneliness, but prepare himself always to stand alone* (Lukács 1974, 44). On the other hand, our hero is an individual engaged in public life, who is committed to the constant, open struggle against conditions as they are, because they can always be better. As a whole, paradigmatic person, (of which his romantic and intellectual sides are only aspects), he is an objective example to others. Kierkegaard tells us that “[t]he self that is objective is not a personal self but a social civic self” (Kierkegaard 1987b, 262). Turning now to a discussion of this civic self, we come to Havel’s response to Heller’s last question.

Greengrocers of the World, Unite!

After all that has been said thus far, it is little wonder why Havel referred to his project of “politics as morality in practice” as *the art of the impossible*.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, our Sisyphean hero presses on, continually breaking through dogmas, lies, and fear onto the political stage. Summoning his talent for story-telling, Havel offered us the parable of the Greengrocer in his essay “The Power of the Powerless” to convey the political

¹⁰³ Consider the similarity between Havel’s characterization and Adorno’s:

Nothing is more unfitting for an intellectual resolved on practicing what was earlier called philosophy, than to wish, in discussion, and one might almost say in argumentation, to be right. The very wish to be right, down to its subtlest form of logical reflection, is an expression of that spirit of self-preservation which philosophy is precisely concerned to break down. ... When philosophers, who are well known to have difficulty in keeping silent, engage in conversation, they should try always to lose the argument, but in such a way as to convict their opponent of untruth. The point should not be to have absolutely correct, irrefutable, watertight cognitions- for they inevitably boil down to tautologies, but insights which cause the question of their justness to judge itself (Adorno 1978, 70-71).

impact and significance of this new form of radical engagement. After years of *playing the game*, after going through the countless motions of being the system's *particular person* and placing the sign that reads “workers of the world unite” for inauthentic reasons, Havel asks us to

... imagine that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogan merely to ingratiate himself. He stops voting in elections that he knows are a farce. He begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings. And he even finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support. In this revolt the greengrocer steps out of living within the lie. He rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. He discovers once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom a concrete significance. His revolt is an attempt to live within the truth (Havel 1991, 146).

But as we can see from the actions this greengrocer undertakes, they are more than just living within the truth; he is becoming an autonomous individual in an explicitly public and political way. With the revolt of the Greengrocer, which is not unlike Havel's own actions, we find Havel's response to Heller's last question. His response to “how should I act?” is a culmination of his absurdist outlook, romanticism, and intellectual attitude. It is an absurdist conception of democratic engagement—in other words, antipolitics.

In Havel's antipolitics we find the full elaboration of the rebellious individual's civic self, the Absurd citizen. If the Absurd romantic intellectual's pluralist, self-critical, and non-violent ethos predisposes him to democratic politics, then it is civic action based on this ethos that brings a new expression of democratic citizenship into existence. Antipolitics, as described by Havel, is beyond “dissent” and “dissidents,” and actually better characterizes the activism of those who were engaged in opposition behind the Iron

¹⁰⁴ This is the title that Havel chose for a volume of his speeches while president (Havel 1998).

Curtain.¹⁰⁵ Although revolt was the axis on which Havel's antipolitics turned, it was hardly enough in terms of citizenship; antipolitics had to express a new form of political relations between people as well. This new form of politics needed to sharply differentiate itself from politics as it existed, which is why "antipolitics" became the banner under which the opposition gathered. Despite the "anti" in antipolitics, it was a call for creative, non-conformist forms of civic engagement in everyday political life—once again, a yes-saying that also negates. As such, antipolitics was neither *anti-political* nor *a-political*. To act antipolitically meant to effect a critical rupture with the spirit of political life under communism, thereby radically negating its dominance through autonomous civic engagement with others.

The underlying premise of antipolitics was that politics had to go beyond its current form and substance in order to be true to its own ideals and promise—even in terms of the ideals and promises of the Communist Party's ideology. Yet, aside from the Party's ideology, antipolitics also was meant to challenge both really existing socialism and liberalism on the basis that they were not living up to (or, at times, even concerned with pursuing) their basic ideals. It is in this sense that the practice of antipolitics can be understood as a way toward what Havel called a "post-democratic system" (Havel 1991, 211). Given what has been argued thus far about Havel's political leanings, it should not be too surprising that his vision of post-democracy bears a considerable resemblance to Heller's Great Republic. But before we compare Havel and Heller's versions of radical democracy, the specific aspects of Havel's antipolitics need to be clarified. The ethical

¹⁰⁵ Havel disliked the label "dissident," arguing that "[i]t is truly a cruel paradox that the more some citizens stand up in defense of other citizens, the more they are labeled with a word that in effect separates them from those 'other citizens'" (Havel 1991, 171).

and non-elitist facets of this approach to political praxis are two of its novel contributions for re-thinking democratic citizenship.

In his essay “Anatomy of a Reticence,” Havel explains how antipolitics “grows out of an essentially different conception of politics” (Havel 1991, 320). This different conception of politics arises from its unconventional relationship to power. In a conventional, systemic sense, the practitioner of antipolitics has no formal power within the system. Yet, by taking up the project of antipolitics the individual realizes what the fabled *power of the powerless* is—the civic impact of demonstrating the falsity of the system by living in the truth of its ideals.¹⁰⁶ The creative power of the individual to negate the reified façade of the system—a system which pretends freedom and equality exists while it ruthlessly constrains it—is demonstrated by acting publicly in a manner that the system claims to support, but actually endangers its grip on formal power. By acting as the “free citizen” that the system claims one is permitted to be (but actually does not tolerate), antipolitics was not only radical, but eventually became revolutionary. This is what Havel called in another essay, “Politics and Conscience,” the “[p]olitics of man, not of the apparatus. Politics growing from the heart, not from a thesis” (Havel 1991, 271). The romanticism that drives this passionate form of engagement is also its self-grounding justification. The difference in this case is that the synthetic expression of radical needs and critical thought takes on a distinctive (anti)political character. Havel explains that the antipolitical citizen

...can offer, if anything, only his skin—and he offers it solely because he has no other way of affirming the truth he stands for. His actions simply articulate his dignity as a citizen, regardless of the cost. The innermost foundation of his “political” undertaking is moral and existential (Havel 1991, 230).

¹⁰⁶ This being a form of living and acting out immanent critique.

In this way, the power of the antipolitical citizen is immanently connected to the system's, moving with its rhythm and tempo. The difference, however, is this movement inverts the Party's ideological power, turning the system's ideals and deceptions against it, by surpassing it in terms of its own promises. The more grand the system's unfulfilled promise, the more expansive the constellation of revolt and antipolitics grows.

By acting (anti)politically, our hero triumphs over the system, however limited that triumph may be. Not only does he realize a marked degree of autonomy and authenticity for himself, but, furthermore, becomes a paradigmatic person for others. All the while, our hero also refrains from the messianic temptations that have ensnared radical intellectuals of the past. In an example of both self-limitation and creative action, Havel explains how the practitioner of antipolitics "...sees his mission more in defending man against the pressures of the system than in imagining better systems" (Havel 1991, 231). The defense offered by antipolitical action turns the pressure of the system against itself. Specifically, if the Communist ideology claims that one lives in a worker's paradise and substantive democracy, then one can proceed to act as if they did. This is antipolitical precisely because although the individual is *in form* acting "in conformity" with the Party's ideology, substantively, he has ceased to "play the game" in which everyone agrees that the ideology is a lie and carries on inauthentically anyway. The regime can respond in one of two ways: it can either crack down on those who live as such (thus exposing its own lies and the performative contradiction between dogma and reality in everyday life), or it must itself change and actually live up to its promises. Thus, the vision of the better system is not *imagined*, but rather arises from an actual confrontation of the problems of that given system.

Within the notion of antipolitics (of course) is “politics,” and therefore, it must be said that antipolitics went beyond the individual citizen and came to characterize a broader political ethos among dissidents. It is almost inevitable that one begins discussing politics *writ large* when explicating the details of antipolitics. For this reason, it is necessary to make reference to two other former dissidents who have also contributed to the development of this notion and practice. Besides Havel, both Adam Michnik and George Konrád explain this political ethos in the essays “The New Evolutionism” and “Antipolitics” respectively (Konrád 1984; Michnik 1985). Their discussions of antipolitics, however, will be put off until the next chapter because of their more “political” and less “individual” or existential qualities. Presently, we will remain with Havel’s conception of antipolitics in order to complete the exposition of its moral and political meaning for the individual.

Thus, although the practitioner of antipolitics wishes to free and protect man from the pressures of the system, it does not begin with a critique of the system; rather, it begins with a critique of the would-be antipolitical man himself. When we consider the vast, radical transformation of the particular, reified person into the Sisyphean hero, we find that much of the difficult work has been accomplished already. What remains is to translate this rebellious, Absurd individual into an Absurd citizen, and transform the ethics of personality into an ethics of citizenship. Havel makes the connections by advising that

...it will do us no harm occasionally to remind ourselves of the meaning of the state, which is, and must remain, truly human—which means it must be intellectual, spiritual, and moral (Havel 1993, 19).

Aside from the Hegelian overtones about the state being the synthesis of the human spirit, Havel also echoes Marx's call for the constitution being rooted in its actual constituents—individuals as citizens. It follows, therefore, that if our rebellious individuals are to become the antipolitical citizens who create a political constitution that realizes autonomy and human dignity, then the mean-ends dilemma must once again take center stage. Although our hero has been able to forego violence thus far, by entering the realm of antipolitical action his confrontation with systemic power becomes more a matter of concrete struggle than a matter of a liberated consciousness. Nonetheless, given the recognition of the struggle to come, Havel's Absurd sensibility informs and emboldens his praxis: "Of course, I don't know whether the democratic spirit will succeed. But I do know how *not* to succeed, which is by means that contradict the ends" (Havel 1993, 7).

In following the upsurge of the individual's revolt from the depths of his subjectivity to the political stage, we glimpse the phenomenological revelation of what Nietzsche called *amor fati*, or love of fate (Nietzsche 1967, 258).¹⁰⁷ But much like the earlier discussion of necessity, this fate is not something that is in opposition to one's autonomy—it is *accidental*, and only becomes fate because it is *chosen*. On the political stage, therefore, is where the Absurd individual in revolt can most fully—though not completely—realize this fate and *become what he or she is*: an autonomous person whose human dignity is recognized. The inner light that guides the individual in this process is, therefore, of considerable importance in this connection. The political stage suggests interaction with others; an individual in revolt on this stage suggests that the interaction

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche writes: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity." (Ecce Homo, 285).

will include confrontation. But to ensure that this confrontation takes the form of a bloodless exchange of competing value hierarchies by autonomous individuals, the ethics of personality must include a revised version of that foremost ancient political virtue—prudence, or *phronesis*.

At times referred to as “practical wisdom,” prudence is, therefore, more than just a way of thinking—it is critical thinking that is immanently tied to deciding and acting. As such, prudence suggests deliberation (both within one’s self and with others), judgement, and ultimately praxis of some kind (either action or inaction). Prior to actually taking action, however, Aristotle tells us that “prudence is a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good and bad for a human being” (Aristotle 1999, 89). Aristotle goes on to argue that, with regard to politics, things can always be otherwise, which in our case includes the implication that political truths,¹⁰⁸ such as the expression of one’s authenticity, are best brought into being via action guided by prudence. With regard to the “reason” that grasps this truth, we make a break with Aristotle. Our paradigmatic person has demonstrated that a thinking which mediates between an Absurd outlook and critical reason is what *generates*—not grasps—the radical orientation to everyday day life of our autonomous-yet-Sisyphean hero.

But where does this thinking come from? If it is only an accidental endowment that occurs randomly among people, then we may be wasting our time here, because some of us will have it and others will not. Rest assured, we can keep reading and pursue the argument to its conclusion: while revolt may arise from the spontaneous upsurge of one’s radical needs over and against alienated everyday life, ethics is something chosen,

and therefore, something that can be acquired and developed. Explaining prudence in relation to the individual's revolt, Heller writes

I do not mean a mental property in general, but rather a specific mental capacity which comes about exclusively as a result of achieving a measure of "distancing" from particularity, and which becomes for the individual to some extent a sense (Heller 1984a, 24).

Thus the critical distance one creates between one's prior "particular," reified self and one's newly liberated self begins to inform one's thinking about living in truth versus living a lie. In a sense, it is a matter of knowing both sides—the reified and the autonomous—of everyday life, that grounds the ethics of personality and responsibility that eventually informs one's political *practical wisdom*.

With regard to democracy, Aristotle argues that the good man and good citizen require knowledge of both being ruled and ruling (Aristotle 1946, 105). Is this not precisely what constitutes the experience of angst, revolt, and the becoming of the individual? He knows the abuses of the system and how its power infiltrated his subjectivity, as well as what it is like to break free from such heteronomy. Similarly, our hero has come to know both sides of the Absurd—that human existence is essentially meaningless, but, at the same time people are the one's through which meaning(s) enter into the world, and subsequently shape everyday life. As our Sisyphean hero's gaze comes to rest on political life and its inherent problems, he is fully aware that the given system is not necessary—it can be otherwise. Yet, he is now also aware that change does not simply *come*, it must be made. How one makes this change is the ultimate decision prior to (anti)political action. With Havel, and the many others who engaged in such radical thought and political opposition, the critical distance and knowledge they gained

¹⁰⁸ As opposed to metaphysical truths.

between their reified selves, and the past nihilistic/messianic projects of revolt, made possible the reconciliation of radicalism to pluralist, humanist, and democratic politics.

Despite this commitment to non-violent political radicalism, one should not be led to believe that antipolitical engagement was a conservative Burkean project or an East European version of “third way” liberalism. To do so would be a gross misunderstanding of Havel’s radical diagnosis of the problems that antipolitics was meant to confront. He explains:

The ‘dissident’ movements do not shy away from the idea of violent political overthrow because the idea seems too radical, but on the contrary, because it does not seem radical enough. ... the problem lies far too deep to be settled through mere systemic changes, either governmental or technological (Havel 1991, 184).

This problem, which he refers to in the “Power of the Powerless,” is not one that is limited to the Eastern Bloc either. Havel addresses both East and West when he states that “[i]f a better economic and political model is to be created, then perhaps more than ever before it must derive from profound existential and moral changes in society” (Havel 1991, 162). For Havel, of course, these changes begin with the individual and the choice of living within the truth, taking responsibility for that choice, and politically, confronting the instances of abuse or neglect that the system (any system) visits upon the individual.

Yet, even as he criticizes Western liberalism alongside really existing socialism, the non-elitist, and therefore, thoroughly democratic character of his antipolitics is unmistakable. As a project grounded in the autonomy of individuals, whose self-imposed limitation is tied to the mutual recognition of others’ autonomy (i.e. human dignity), the form antipolitics can take is otherwise delimited only by each individual’s imagination.

Beginning with authenticity and extending to antipolitics, Havel explains how this kind of engagement

...covers a vast territory whose outer limits are vague and difficult to map, a territory full of modest expressions, of human volition, the vast majority of which will remain anonymous and whose political impact will probably never be felt or described any more concretely than simply as a part of a social climate or mood (Havel 1991, 176).

Since the possibility of revolt is tied to one's radical needs, and revolt is the road down which the individual travels toward autonomy, and potentially antipolitics, we can affirm that such a political project is indeed a *democratic* possibility—that is, a possibility open to all members of the *demos*. After all, Havel chose a greengrocer as his symbol of revolt and authenticity—not an intellectual. Furthermore, revolt and antipolitics are democratic in the formal sense as well because they recognize democracy as the political system with the most potential for the realization of each and all's radical needs. Havel consistently articulated the notion that this transformation of everyday political life ought to proceed democratically, from the bottom-up.

I am convinced that we will never build a democratic state based on the rule of law if we do not at the same time build a state that is—regardless of how unscientific this may sound to the ears of a political scientist—humane, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and cultural (Havel 1993, 73).

Out of these “products of the human spirit” and a renewed ethos of authenticity, Havel believed that an *antipolitical political* approach to change could lead us beyond our given systemic limitations (East and West), and toward thinking about and creating post-democratic politics.

Much like Heller, Havel indulged his imagination and offered us a weak utopian vision of what post-democracy would look like. Proceeding from the argument that the

“traditional approach” to democracy, which is typically dominated by two or three major parties rather than the majority of its citizens, will not suffice, Havel states that

It would seem to make more sense if, again, people rather than political parties were elected (that is, if people could be elected without party affiliation). Politicians would solicit the support of the electors as individuals in their own right, not merely as appendages to the mega-machinery of parties or as party favorites. There should be no limit to the number of political parties, but they should rather, be something like political clubs, where people could refine their opinions, get to know each other personally, and seek to determine who among them would be the best to administer the affairs of the *polis*. ...[parties] should not participate directly in power, since when they do they inevitably become bureaucratic, corrupt, and undemocratic (Havel 1990, 16-17).¹⁰⁹

To be clear, Havel is not against the organization of politically motivated interest groups with common views. Rather, he is explicit in his condemnation of political organization “that obscures personal responsibility or gives anyone perks as a reward for obedience to a group that is aiming to take power” (Havel 1990, 17). Evident in the above characterization and from what was said in the prior chapter, Havel’s vision of radical democracy is *more radical* than Heller’s; she argued that a strictly “direct democratic” arrangement would be both impractical and even dangerous. It was for these reasons that Heller insisted that formal parliamentary institutions remain part of politics in general, and work alongside with institutions of direct democracy. To anticipate the discussion in the next chapter, the East European constellation of dissent offered us a model of direct democracy (in embryo) that could have led in either direction—in addition to the one it ultimately took.

With regard to the economic arrangement of society, Havel and Heller share a remarkably similar vision. Keeping in mind what was already said about Havel’s notion of socialism and allegiance with the Left, he writes

I believe in the principle of self-management, which is probably the only way of achieving what the theorists of socialism have dreamed about, that is, the genuine (i.e. informal) participation of the workers in economic decision making, leading to a feeling of genuine responsibility for their collective work (Havel 1991, 211).

This conception of a self-managed economy does not exclude a market or private ownership, but it does democratize it significantly. Havel sees ownership tied directly to responsibility, and thinks that it is politically dangerous if individuals are prohibited from owning private property. Yet, these political and economic statements do problematize the perception that Havel was a partisan of liberalism or capitalism—or even liberal democracy. Although he clearly takes the side of liberal values, Havel’s thought and actions symbolize how even liberal values can be imagined in ways beyond really existing socialism and liberalism.

As we draw to the conclusion of this discussion, it is evident that some of the same criticisms that were leveled against Heller’s vision of politics also apply to Havel’s. One can get a sense of the problem in the following passage: “It is only with the full existential backing of every member of the community that a permanent bulwark against creeping totalitarianism can be established” (Havel 1991, 211). Although Havel is declaring this in an affirmative manner, it can also be read with an air of despair. A similar existential commitment would also be necessary to even approach the post-democracy that Havel describes. It must be kept in mind, therefore, that the possibility of revolt and antipolitics does not presuppose their manifestation. Even if the particular person feels the pangs of his unfulfilled radical needs, he must still choose them, and himself as an individual in revolt, as well as a practitioner of antipolitics. Nonetheless, whether this radical spirit remains limited to a few courageous people or comes to

¹⁰⁹ This argument is reminiscent of Robert Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” and the dynamic of political

characterize an entire season of political upheaval, its lesson transcends its historical moment and demonstrates that

[t]he point where living within the truth ceases to be a mere negation of living a lie and becomes articulated in a particular way is the point at which something is born that might be called the “independent spiritual, social, and political life of society” (Havel 1991, 176).

Yet, despite all that was said about Havel being the paradigmatic person who ushers in the new possibility of Absurd, romantic, and authentic radical democratic politics, it does not eliminate radicalism’s darker, messianic, and nihilistic side from arriving on the political scene. What this discussion does demonstrate, however, is that an equally—if not more radical approach to revolt and emancipatory politics not only has “successfully” come to pass under communism, but that lives on today. Thus, those interested in revolt, in combating oppression and injustice, need not put off the fight. Rather, they can learn the lessons of East European dissent, and discover their own expression of radicalism without violence, and revolt amenable to democratic politics. It is in this sense that Havel is a paradigmatic person; he reminds us that such forms of emancipatory politics were not only possible then, but are real possibilities now.

Modest Heroes with Melancholy Hope

Having seen the horrors of the Second World War and faced with the bleak political landscape of the Cold War, Adorno wrote (with melancholy hope) that “...in this age of universal social repression, the picture of freedom against society lives in the crushed, abused individual’s features alone” (Adorno 1973, 265). While the universality of social repression may be contestable, Adorno’s understanding of the individual seems to ring true for Havel, as well as Heller. What then can we conclude from the preceding

parties; see Political Parties (1999).

arguments that described not only Havel, but also the paradigmatic character of our Sisyphian hero? It seems that while an individual can achieve and inspire autonomy and human dignity by the above-described means, they require endless engagement. Otherwise, he is beset and overtaken by the system (any system) as it seeks to impose its control and demand identity with its needs. Even with the achievement of authenticity and antipolitics, the Absurd individual is condemned to continually struggle with his world. Thus, alienation can be overcome—if only temporarily—because it is created by human conventions and will. The Absurd, however, is inescapable; it can only be confronted by those who bring meaning into an otherwise meaningless world. Though the world remains *essentially* meaningless, it can become *humanly meaningful*.

So even with the occasional triumph over reified subjectivity and alienated everyday life, Camus reminds us that “any fulfillment is bondage; [i]t obliges one to higher fulfillment” (Camus 1998, 270). Even in momentarily fulfilling one’s radical needs by creating autonomy and human dignity, one still remains bound to the pursuit of their realization. Paradoxically, only by relinquishing this project of revolt and creation altogether can one slip these bonds. But in doing so, one submits one’s self to a different master—the system’s heteronomy. Is there any wonder why we call the spirit of revolt *the unhappy consciousness*! This is what makes the task of revolt, of becoming an autonomous individual—that is recognized as such, and recognizes the human dignity of others, while simultaneously laying the foundations for radical democratic politics—an undeniable labour of Sisyphus. Our hero would not have it any other way.

Chapter 4: Founding a Free City - The Democratic Opposition in Eastern Europe

Unhappy the land that has need of heroes.

(Brecht 1991)

The spirit of rebellion can exist only in a society where a theoretical equality conceals great factual inequality.

(Camus 1991b, 20)

Each human being is a society in miniature.

(Novalis 1997, 30)

From Individual Revolt to Democratic Opposition

By working through the theoretical and individual sediments of the East European constellation, we have set the stage for a discussion of the oppositional strategies, structures, and ethos of what came to be called civil society. This is the stage upon which our rebellious Sisyphean heroes played out the political drama of emancipation in everyday life. But what this chapter also demonstrates is that the term civil society now obfuscates more than it illuminates the struggles and achievement of the democratic opposition after 1968. “Civil society” signified something specific to the people who practiced it; it was the collective, civic face of many individual efforts at antipolitics in Eastern Europe. Today, its specific meaning has been either subsumed and assimilated into meta-theoretical debates over “what civil society really is and what it ought to do,” or is paid lip-service and then subsequently ignored due to its naive or impractical character. What is lost in the process is an effort to understand the new possibilities that the East European expression of civil society introduced for critiquing and transforming already existing democratic societies.

In the pages that follow, this *lost treasure* of the democratic opposition will be recovered. This salvage mission begins by revisiting the process by which East European civil society emerged from individual revolt and was transformed into a coherent (if at times small) democratic opposition. The point of this exercise is to theorize this phenomenon, making it into an idea that can travel beyond its historical moment and inspire others. Some scholars believe that Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit was his attempt to translate the French Revolution into thought for Germans, in the hopes of cultivating freedom, first in their minds and then in their lives. This considerably more modest project attempts to express in thought the phenomena that came together to buttress civil society in Eastern Europe. The intention here is to *get below* the exceptional associations such as Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and KOR¹¹⁰/Solidarity in Poland, in order to find the wellspring from which they drew their energy and support. The intention is not to take away from the significance of these associations, but rather to throw light on that which often is lost in their shadow.

A concise assessment of East European civil society's character is offered by Vladimir Tismaneanu. Writing about civil society and the revolutions of 1989, he states

...civil society comprises the independent, nongovernmental groups, associations, and institutions that have emerged in Eastern Europe in recent years, especially after 1980. It was primarily thanks to the existence of such structures which the Czechoslovak philosopher Václav Benda once called "parallel polis" that the breakthrough could result in a smooth, nonviolent, change (Tismaneanu 1993, xiii).

An appreciation of civil society's support structures is of vital importance for recreating an accurate picture of the democratic opposition's emergence in post-totalitarian society. Jacek Kurón, the Polish former dissident, activist, and Left-wing intellectual, implicitly

¹¹⁰ KOR: Committee for Workers' Defense

concurr, stating that Solidarity did not merely appear one day in 1980. Rather, it was an outgrowth of a long, slow process of development. In Kurón's reflections on his involvement in the opposition, the achievements of KOR/Solidarity, and the 1989 revolutions, he writes

Recalling those early years, in light of what now has been accomplished, I look back in astonishment. It was so simple then. What we wanted was to read books, talk to one another freely, to collect money for people needing help: the simplest human actions. Yet one can organize society around these simple actions and goals, and this very fact is like a time bomb ticking away under totalitarianism (Kurón 1999, 200).

Aside from justifying the need to go back and critically reassess the political upsurge that arose from such simple actions and needs, two of Kurón's comments require further attention. The first is the notion of a "time bomb," and the second is the experience of "astonishment."

The imagery of a bomb detonating seems to contradict the nonviolent ethos of the democratic opposition and the general character of the revolutions of 1989. Given Kurón's subsequent comments and the history of those events, one can draw the conclusion that what he had in mind was not a bomb that explodes quickly, annihilating everything around it. But what he may have meant, rather, was a *timed* bomb that releases its energy slowly, in a gradual yet undeniable manner. One can imagine such an explosion having a dream-like quality: the blast of free expression creeps upward from individuals, to opposition movements, and then through society, rattling the ranks of the regime, as the people below stand mesmerized at their own deed, not believing the scene unfolding before their eyes. To their credit, the activists learned quickly how to control their astonishment arising from the incredible scene of Communist dominance crumbling due to the slow but steady release of radical democratic power from below. With regard

to Poland, members of KOR and Solidarity incrementally filled the crumbling façade of the regime's power with the values and practices of their parallel culture and politics until the revolutionary moment came, after which nothing was to be the same. It is for this reason that Kurón ends his reflections with the following assertion:

...the road to democracy has to be a gradual evolution, of gradual building of democratic institutions. It is a revolution in the sense that we are radically changing the system. We are going from totalitarianism to democracy. But if we are to have a truly democratic revolution, it must be achieved through a gradual process (Kurón 1999, 201).

An assertion, furthermore, that highlights the optimistic side of Kolakowski's judgment regarding the demise of European communism—"[t]he only thing that we know for certain: nothing is certain; nothing is impossible" (Kolakowski 1999, 51).

The question that now begs to be asked is whether it is more *astonishing* that such a gradual process of revolt and democratic engagement developed amid Communism, or that a similarly gradual process of radical democratic change is absent in countries that provide the political and legal groundwork to make it possible? This question is posed not so much to elicit an answer (not yet anyway), but to prompt us to consider exactly how these people were able to cultivate a passion for democratic engagement, and create informal structures to support it in such an inhospitable environment. Part of the answer has been given in the prior chapters. The radical, democratic, and nonviolent impulse arose out of the longing to fulfill one's radical needs, linking expressions of autonomy to meaningful political co-existence based on mutual recognition of one another's autonomy (human dignity). Out of these agonistic-yet-nonviolent relationships a general ethos of pluralism, responsibility, and self-creation grew. It united the participants in definite ways, yet based this unity on the respect granted to the other's autonomy. As such, it

created an experience of everyday life that stood in stark contrast to the regime's dictatorship over needs.

It was on the basis of individual autonomy and non-dogmatic political convention that nascent forms of radical democracy took shape and, therefore, it is against this historical record that the explanatory power of the term *civil society* needs to be weighed. Within the realm of post-totalitarianism, civil society's underlying aspects could be understood as "radical democracy in embryo." They foreshadowed the possible realization of a new type of democratic politics, even if at the time it remained something less than a fully functioning democracy. Thus, if the East European expression of civil society is going to add something to the current debate over the practice and future of democracy, we must first delve down into the roots of its power. The radical core of East European civil society is made up of three separate but complementary aspects. These aspects are the strategy of *New Evolutionism*, as formulated by Adam Michnik, the informal structures and institutions of the *Parallel Polis*, as characterized by Václav Benda, and the more generalized ethos of *Antipolitics*, as discussed by Georg Konrád. These aspects do not supersede what has been already worked out in prior chapters, but rather represents the condensation of ideas and individuals actions in political forms.

Out of these three aspects, two characteristics emerge that define the specific contribution that the East European experience brings to the debate and development of democratic thought and practice. Thus, before revisiting East European civil society's underlying aspects, these defining characteristics will be presented and will become the measure against which the current literature on civil society (East European and otherwise) will be judged. By doing so, we will see to what extent the current scholarly

literature does justice to the “newness” of the East European phenomenon. What such an inquiry will demonstrate, furthermore, is the extent to which the radical democratic character of East European civil society has been under-appreciated and largely neglected by scholars, intellectuals, and civic activists.

Too often, western academics who have written about civil society since 1989, and looked to the East to justify the timeliness of their inquiry, have dressed civil society in the garb of the past rather than in the bold colors of the future. In contrast to the majority of civil society scholars,¹¹¹ Heller and Feher remind us that the East European democratic opposition is not so easily assimilated into western, liberal theories and structures, as critical and progressive as they may claim to be. Heller and Feher write:

Not only do the militants of the Eastern opposition advocate tenets, some of which are clearly incompatible with several dimensions *but one* of the Western leftist tradition, but more importantly, the majority of them also present such unexpected combinations of options for the Western observer that the latter can hardly fit them into a Western theoretical framework. This new constellation is, further, caused by the deliberately detotalizing attitudes of the Eastern opposition (Fehér and Heller 1987, 42).

The explicit elaboration of the democratic opposition’s tenets, and their connections to the western Leftist tradition, is therefore, the task at hand. To illustrate the expansive range of these unexpected political combinations and detotalizing attitudes, an analysis of the three above mentioned aspects of the East European democratic opposition will follow the critical assessment of the current civil society literature.

The Radical Standard

Two defining characteristics comprise the radical standard against which the civil society literature will be measured. They are directly abstracted from the strategy of new evolutionism, the structures of the parallel polis, and the ethos of antipolitics. As we

proceed, it is important to keep in mind that these core aspects of East European civil society in turn arose out of the subjective revolts of individuals. It is necessary to restate this because without such individual initiatives, the political networks and ethos that came to form civil society would have been impossible. Furthermore, it must be clear to the reader that these “aspects,” as well as their “defining characteristics,” are not meant to be exhaustive, but are, rather, theoretical formulations (some belonging to the activists involved and some to the author) of complex processes. Thus, we should not give in to the temptation of reifying East European civil society solely into these characteristics and aspects. They are merely ways of critically revisiting the event of political opposition, passionate activism, and radical imagination in Eastern Europe between 1968 and 1989.

With this said, the following two characteristics are ways of thinking about the historical specificity of East European civil society. By working through these characteristics, furthermore, we can also understand the many ways the East European democratic opposition is not civil society as it is commonly understood. The first defining characteristic is historical. East European civil society was a historically new phenomenon because it was primarily a *public sphere* completely independent of the market or ‘bourgeois’ relations that are traditionally considered part and parcel of civil society. In this sense, the public sphere that emerged in Eastern Europe was *not* civil society in the strict western, historical understanding of the concept and political phenomenon. We actually find shades of the classical Greek *polis* inherent in the public sphere created by the democratic opposition, which in its democratic Athenian form was

¹¹¹ Scholars as different as Robert Putnam, Jean Cohen, Andrew Arato, Adam Seligman, and John Keane.

the realm of politics and not economy (οικονομία).¹¹² This partially explains Benda's formulation of the *parallel polis* imagery to characterize the independent initiatives and associations in Eastern Europe.

The second defining characteristic pertains to this new, independent public sphere's dynamic; its pulse was one of *double negativity*. While one moment of this double negativity has already been discussed at length in the previous chapters—i.e. the negativity inherent in an individual's revolt against his prior, alienated self—the second negativity only becomes a real force on the political stage. It is the negativity that such individuals, in their capacity as civic groups and movements, pose in relation to a system that fails to acknowledge and develop in the direction of its citizens' radical needs. Thus, the first negativity turns on the revolt of the individual against his reified condition, and the second on public expressions of radical needs via citizen engagement against the shortcomings of the given socio-political conditions.

This double negativity is nothing other than the upsurge of antipolitics from its individual form into a political ethos and activity. But such systemic negativity not only impacts on politics writ-large, but returns to its source, the people, through a reinvigorated public sphere. In this way, one-time subjective projects of emancipation become objective political phenomena, and subsequently shine as hopeful symbols that infuse the fleshy vernacular of everyday life with new verve. It is of this process that Adorno, who was famously reluctant to affirm any positive image of freedom, writes,

¹¹² Most notably in Aristotle's *Politics*, "polis" is the word for "city" or "civic association" (politiki kinonia); in relation to the polis, nomos denoted laws or rules that govern the polis. In contrast, economy—or each citizen's financial matters were issues of another realm. Quite literally, economy (oikonomia) breaks down to mean rule or law over the house (or household). Although a city-state's concern for trading routes or wealth was an issue dealt with in the political realm, all private financial concerns were not matters of the polis—each citizen ruled over his own household privately (Aristotle 1946).

“There is no available model of freedom save one: that consciousness, as it intervenes in the total social constitution, will through that constitution intervene in the complex of the individual” (Adorno 1973, 265). Of course, the assumed character of the individual is reflexive, rebellious, and self-consciously political. If we understand this double negativity as the perpetual journey of an *unhappy consciousness* in pursuit of autonomy and human dignity, then we can speak of the progress of freedom once more. Yet, differing from the Hegelian trope, this *progress of freedom* does not reflect a metaphysics of Reason, but rather an experience of suffering, angst, and people’s revolt against it.

The experience of oppression and revolt is precisely why the discussion of the East European democratic opposition is of crucial significance. Antipolitics, as it was practiced in conjunction with the strategy of new evolutionism through the informal institutions of the parallel polis, constitutes the marrow that nourished this new event of democratic opposition. As was said before, what made the expression of negativity inherent in the democratic opposition different from past emancipatory movements was that it maintained a radical yet non-violent orientation toward engagement. This orientation also demonstrates why East European civil society has more in common with the spirit of Antonio Gramsci than John Locke—a distinction that will be elaborated in the next, concluding chapter.

For now, to assist in elaborating the significance of our first defining characteristic, we will turn to Adam Seligman’s The Idea of Civil Society (1992) and Jürgen Habermas’ The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962). Seligman’s work focuses on “the concept of civil society as a concept and not as an existing social or historical reality” (Seligman 1995, 4). Habermas, on the other hand,

offers an analysis of the historical development of civil society. Together, their works offer a comprehensive picture of civil society's growth in Europe, which will in turn shed considerable light on the ideational and historical newness of the East European expression. To be fair, however, it is not my intention to cast East European civil society as a phenomenon with no links to western liberal traditions. Rather, what I do wish to demonstrate is that the democratic opposition of Eastern Europe did not imagine itself as the champion and restorer of liberalism, but more broadly as the legitimate heir to the best legacies of the Enlightenment—both morally and politically. It is in this sense that East European civil society maintains its continuity with the west, yet simultaneously reaches out beyond it into the unknown.

A Public Sphere without Civil Society?

In so far as he examines Eastern Europe, Seligman looks to the events from 1987 to approximately 1990, hoping to find evidence of the 'transcendental,' spiritual aspect of civil society that he considered essential to the thought of Adam Ferguson, among others. To his disappointment, however, he observed that after the revolutions of 1989, civil society was often used as a rhetorical device by those seeking to justify their personal bids for legitimacy and political power. While cynical plays on this notion abounded after 1989, this line of argumentation already brings us too far from the central issue. The main thrust of Seligman's argument contends that civil society is essentially composed of a public and private sphere. If the conception is lacking either, with all its normative and structural components, then we no longer have civil society. He explains that

[t]he public space of interaction in civil society is thus a public space only in so far as it is distinguished from the social actors who enter it as private individuals. Where there is no private sphere, there is, concomitantly, no public one: both

must exist in dialectical unity for sense to be made of either one (Seligman 1995, 5).

Thus, for there to be civil society, conceptually it must include the private interactions of bourgeois individuals as well as the public life of the *citoyen*.

It is not difficult to see why Seligman has chosen to define civil society in such a manner. This formulation keeps much of the traditional philosophical canon within its bounds—Locke, Tocqueville, Hegel, and even Marx’s critiques are still speaking about the same notion. Seligman’s characterization, furthermore, also attempts to challenge the conceptual stretching that occurred once the term civil society became an academic sensation. Yet, to achieve this, he had to essentialize the concept, leaving considerably limited room for intellectual play. The space that is afforded for imagining civil society remains steadfastly within the orbit of liberalism. Thus, if we accept and proceed from Seligman’s theoretically rigorous formulation, we are subsequently faced with an important decision regarding the conceptual label for the revival of democratic politics in Eastern Europe: *either it is not civil society because it lacked the idea of bourgeois relations, or civil society can be conceived beyond the confines of liberalism.*

Although members of the democratic opposition were against the planned economy and favored private property, they were not necessarily advocates of bourgeois society or capitalism. As the former Czechoslovak dissident and Charter 77 member Milos Hajek recalls, Milton Friedman, after meeting with Polish anti-communist intellectuals, noted that their political and social values could be characterized as “socialist.” Hajek states that the same was likely true for Czechoslovakia.

Opinion polls referring to the state’s obligations concerning education, healthcare, or social welfare show that peoples’ opinions are much closer to social democratic values than to conservative or liberal values (quoted in Walzer 1995, 257).

Indeed, the extension of democracy into the economy in the hopes of creating a self-managed society was a recurring and popular theme of the democratic opposition. While members of the democratic opposition critiqued the failures of really existing socialism, they had no reason to advocate really existing liberalism. Being aware of all the problems of western society, many felt that the answer lay beyond the given societies of both east and west, and they were determined to seek it out. What was unequivocal, however, was their commitment to democracy. “In Eastern Europe,” Konrád wrote, “the demand for democracy makes itself felt in every social organization, in economic and cultural as well as political institutions;” looking toward the future, he claims that “[o]ne might well suppose that democracy would become the universal principle of legitimacy in those societies that we could call postcommunist and at the same time postcapitalist” (Konrád 1984, 140).

But, returning to the question of the best-suited label for political life’s resurgence in Eastern Europe, we need to consider the historical arguments of Habermas alongside those of Seligman. In many ways anticipating and preparing the ground for theoretical arguments such as Seligman’s, Habermas proceeds sociologically and historically to

...conceive bourgeois public sphere as a category that is typical of an epoch. It cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that “civil society” (*bürgerlich Gesellschaft*) originating in the European High Middle Ages; nor can it be transferred, idealtypically generalized, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations (Habermas 1989, xvii).

Through his argument and analysis, Habermas not only grounds Hegel’s complex and abstract philosophical vision of civil society in critical social theory, but also offers a nuanced challenge to the Marxist tendency to lose sight of the bourgeois public sphere (*bürgerlich Öffentlichkeit*) amid general critiques of bourgeois/civil society. This line of

Habermas' argumentation was meant to highlight the critical potentials inherent in this bourgeois public sphere and the degree to which it has been overrun by both the private side of liberal society and the administrative rationality of the state.

In terms of Eastern Europe, Habermas' characterization of civil society poses the same problem as Seligman's. Even if we say that what emerged in East Europe was indeed civil society, despite the fact that it was composed of a public sphere without overriding theoretical concerns for entrepreneurial activities, can we still say that it was a *liberal* or *bourgeois* public sphere? Historically, East European civil society did not develop as part of liberal society, but rather as a phenomenon immanently related to (even if opposed to) really existing socialism. In this sense, Slavoj Žižek is correct when he points out that what former East European dissidents (as well as most western observers)

[...] tend, as a rule, to overlook is that the very space from which they themselves criticized and denounced the day-to-day terror and misery was opened and sustained by the Communist breakthrough, by its attempt to escape the logic of Capital. In short, when dissidents like Havel denounced the existing communist regime on behalf of authentic human solidarity, they (unwittingly, for the most part) spoke from the place opened up by Communism itself—this is why they tend to be so disappointed when 'actually existing capitalism' does not meet the high expectations of their anti-communist struggle (Žižek 2001, 131).¹¹³

Thus, what we were faced with in Eastern Europe was a new political phenomenon that shared a common ancestor with bourgeois/civil society, but followed a divergent evolutionary path.

This should not come as too much of a shock; after all, socialism and Marxian philosophy are as much offspring of the Enlightenment as is liberalism. What is ground-

¹¹³ Žižek goes on, supporting the previous chapter's characterization of Václav Havel: "Perhaps Václav Klaus, Havel's pragmatic double, was right when he dismissed Havel as a 'Socialist'."

breaking, however, is that the emerging democratic opposition in Eastern Europe was neither “liberal” nor “socialist,” yet exhibited traits of both. As Heller and Feher explain,

[...] no East European actor seems to suggest practically that, as Marx believed, ‘economy is the heart of civil society.’ Nor do they believe any longer, as people did decades ago, that an economic reform would imply a political re-structuring of society as a ‘historical necessity.’ If such a restructuring can be done at all, people now know, it cannot be achieved without the republican dimension, a fight in and for a new public space (Fehér and Heller 1987, 43).

The complexity of this common ancestry begins to explain why many western liberal scholars paint East European civil society (and its legacies) according to their own palettes. While both East and West shared a common connection to Enlightenment values, there were important differences in the theoretical substance and phenomenal forms of these values. For example, although civil society and democracy are often conflated with liberal democracy (and economic liberalism) in the west, the same was not true for many of the East European activists. The civil society and democracy of the East European imagination aspired to a more social democratic—if not democratic socialist vision of politics.

To understand why, going to the roots of East European civil society is crucial. Adam Michnik is but one reliable guide for excavating the historical specificity of what came to be called civil society in Eastern Europe. In his ground-breaking essay *A New Evolutionism* (1976), Michnik looks back on Marxist Revisionism critically, but makes sure to acknowledge its contribution to the historical development of the democratic opposition. He writes:

In addition to positively influencing Polish learning and culture, revisionism inspired political activity among the citizens. By opposing passivity and internal exile, revisionism laid the basis for independent participation in public life. Faith in one’s ability to exert influence on the fate of society is an absolute prerequisite for political activity. In the case of revisionists, this faith depended on a belief

that the party could be reformed. We can see clearly today that their faith was based on delusions; still, civic activity and open demonstrations of opposition were its real positive results in the years from 1956 to 1968. The majority of oppositionist initiatives during that period originated in these circles, not among steadfast and consistent anticommunists. It is important to remember this fact in weighing the responsibility for the Stalinist beliefs of Poland's leftist intelligentsia. It was the revisionist ex-Stalinist who originated and disseminated dissenting points of view among the intelligentsia—points of view which would later help to revive civil life in Poland in the midst of its difficult reality (Michnik 1985, 137).

This lengthy but telling passage begins to reveal the theoretical and historical differences between the western characterizations of Seligman and Habermas, and the East European constellation. Thus, the understanding that emerges from this juxtaposition of “civil societies” is that according to rigorous theoretical and historical standards, what occurred in Eastern Europe was not ‘civil society’ at all—even if that was the name used by its practitioners and foreign commentators. It was nonetheless, a definite manifestation of an independent public sphere, which was pluralistic, symbolically and practically oppositional, and championed a general ethos of non-violent yet radical democratic politics. If it was civil society, however, then it was like no civil society that had ever come before it.

Two-fold Negativity

This becomes increasingly clear by considering the second defining characteristic—its specific dynamic of double negativity. The characteristic of double negativity is made up of two immanently connected, contingent moments; as was mentioned earlier, the first moment belongs to the individual. Since the public sphere that emerged in Eastern Europe did not arise as an aspect of bourgeois/civil society, it must have had a different source. This source was one's perception of his or her radical needs as unfulfilled, and the subjective revolt one underwent in the effort to pursue them.

Stated differently, the first negativity involved the negation of one's "particular," alienated self, followed by the emergence of a newly critical self-consciousness, which in turn brought about a radical re-orientation to everyday life. Individual negativity has been the object of analysis in chapters 2 (theoretically) and 3 (phenomenologically); as the discussion began to shift to antipolitics and citizenship, however, the ground was already being prepared for the broader political discussion.

It is in terms of the political that the second negativity becomes evident. As a whole, East European civil society manifested negativity on a systemic level. It occurred when individual expressions of revolt passed over into objective socio-political phenomena; those phenomena were imbued with collective (yet still pluralistic) expressions of radical needs. As increasingly populous associations, movements, and initiatives gradually developed and articulated people's radical needs, they were able to undermine, displace, and eventually overtake their regimes' legitimacy and limitations. This is "negative" as well as creative because such actions incrementally negated the Party's dogma, as well as the public's fear and cynicism, and replaced them with new vision and practice of everyday life.

Yet, the more complex lesson of the double negativity inherent in the East European democratic opposition transcends East and West. As Heller and Feher explain, this lesson can be understood in terms of Hegel's *ruse of reason*. Similar to the arguments offered by Horkheimer and Adorno with regard to the Enlightenment, Heller and Feher illustrate the matter by relating it back to the original promise of the socialist emancipatory project: "This 'cunning of reason' through which an initially socialist project has resulted in the present miserable conditions is the historically deserved

punishment for a haughty rationalism which promised a guaranteed and planned society” (Fehér and Heller 1987, 43). Beyond the critique of socialism’s hubris, there also is an implicit critique of any society which believes that its inherent rationality can solve all its social and political problems.

The democratic opposition’s critical attitude toward western, liberal rationality (capitalist, militarist, and political) highlights why many refused to choose a side within the capitalist vs. socialist dichotomy. While nearly every activist in the East longed for civil liberties and rights, they also harbored much distain for the rampant consumerism and social inequalities of the West. “Thus,” as Heller and Feher observed, “from an often totally pragmatic criticism of the planned economy, a much more ‘totalizing’ theoretical result emerged as the message of the East European social struggles (even if not necessarily conscious to the actors themselves)” (Fehér and Heller 1987, 43). The message, and the hidden lesson of the double negativity, is that the western (liberal) economic and political logic must too be eyed critically if we are not to repeat the mistakes of haughty political hubris. It, therefore, is crucial to illustrate the sweeping, “totalizing theoretical result” of the democratic opposition; it is the wholly negative, or *nonidentical totality* that these two defining characteristics come together to make into a political reality. This nonidentical totality, comprised of a new public sphere that is animated by double negativity, is what sets East European civil society apart from all the rest—theoretically and phenomenally.

While these two characteristics will be used momentarily to measure the degree to which some major works of civil society scholarship appreciate the East European variant, a few words need to be said about how this new, independent public sphere and

double negativity work in unison. The most basic observation that can be drawn from this unity is its creation of an alternative source of political power. The argument that East European civil society bristles with power, (even if it is the power of the powerless), is not difficult to prove; individual revolt, open critique, and oppositional movements became the public face of the democratic opposition's *élan vital*.¹¹⁴

We have called the unity of this public engagement and underlying dynamic a nonidentical totality, while knowing that such a label is a contradiction in terms. It is chosen, however, to approximate a very specific human and political phenomenon. As a whole, this nonidentical totality reflects the deep politicization of politics that occurred in Eastern Europe.¹¹⁵ Separately, each term highlights contradictory sides of this politicization of politics. On the one hand, the event of East European civil society is energized by the impulse to conceive of and create everything anew, *nonidentical* to its given condition; that is, to slowly transform self-consciousness, human relationships, and the character of political life from the ground-up. Realistically, it was the only path available given the violent reactions Moscow had to changes from the top-down. On the other hand, this recreation of human and political life was a *totalizing* critique, which also harbored a vision of a new society that was neither socialist nor capitalist—but certainly democratic. The unity of the nonidentical impulse together with the totalizing critique and vision of a new practice of democracy is a theoretical legacy that places East European civil society beyond Seligman's liberal conception.

¹¹⁴ *Élan vital* is a term used by French philosopher Henri Bergson; it translates roughly as “vital impetus.”

¹¹⁵ The notion of *politicizing politics* was first made known to me by Dick Howard, initially in conversation (See also Howard 1996). Its specific character (beyond what it communicates at face-value) will be taken up in the concluding chapter.

The historical record also pushes us past Habermas and inches us in the direction of an admittedly weak utopia. Our nonidentical totality is part of a newly constituted public sphere that was neither bourgeois nor socialist, yet pluralistic and radically democratic. As such it was never a clear-cut, officially delimited sphere of social or political life. Yet, its nonidentical character was never so clear as when it superseded itself in imagination and became practice, as evidenced in the leaps and strides it made from underground concerts and classrooms, to the human rights initiative Charter 77, to the emergence of Solidarity in Poland. Demonstrating its negative (and thus creative) capacity, East European civil society proved never to be merely equal to itself. This type of radical and nonviolent political enterprise strove ahead in the spirit of the enlightenment values that both East and West championed in speech, but often neglected in practice. In effect, the East European opposition did not merely *politicize politics*, it *politicized democracy*, reminding the world of the inherent power in the ideas that it seemed to ignore or take for granted.¹¹⁶

Civil Society, East and West

Much ink has been spilled on meta-theoretical models and debates over what *civil society is* (or ought to be) and *what it ought to do*. Aside from meta-theory, several scholars have relied on both quantitative and qualitative methods to observe and measure civil society. Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone warns of the decline of "social capital" in the United States, while Vladimir Tismaneanu, Barbara Falk, and Krishan Kumar all have revisited civil society in Eastern Europe to offer us different windows into its practical and ideational development. What has not been done until now, however, is the

¹¹⁶ Here again, I am touching upon Howard's concept of politicizing politics. By altering the formulation, I hope to unite this concept with one that was introduced in the first chapter and recurred throughout the

creation of a theory of individual revolt and democratic politics based on the historical experience of the democratic opposition in Eastern Europe. This claim will be justified through a brief comparison of the existing literature on civil society and the defining characteristics of the East European variant offered above. Through a critique of some of this literature, we will prepare the way for a fresh accounting of the main aspects of East European civil society.

One can not speak of civil society in academia today without addressing the work of Robert Putnam. His Bowling Alone (2000), which expanded upon an earlier article (1995), is a thick tome that claims to chart the decline of “social capital” in the United States. Social capital, or civic networks and contacts that bridge and bond people and associations, at first glance seem to be of central importance to the project of East European dissent. The argument could be made that the framework which buttressed East European civil society was precisely an example of the social capital to which Putnam refers. That, however, would be a serious misconception; if we were to look for the two defining characteristics of East European civil society in Putnam’s illustrations of civic life, we would soon learn that they are nowhere to be found.

Putnam claims to “present evidence that social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy” (Putnam 2000, 290). Social capital is able to accomplish this miraculous feat because it tears us away from a sedentary lifestyle, and compels us to play a more active role in civic life through mutually reinforcing and socializing activities. The pay-offs from such behavior, according to Putnam, are the real motivational factors. Once the initial inertia is broken, the development of social capital greases the wheels of civic interaction, which in turn

work—the immanent critique of democracy (another of Howard’s notions).

fosters the reciprocal trust among people, subsequently reducing the “costs” of interaction (Putnam 2000, 288). Thus, contrary to the inclination of “loners” or an ethos of individualism, Putnam argues that the development of social capital improves our chances to get jobs, improve our economic prospects, achieve goals, and resist threats (Putnam 2000, 298).

Yet, the difference between East and West is already clear; Putnam’s social capital can only fulfill needs that do not conflict with the given order. In part, this is because Putnam’s vision of civil society and social capital lacks any negative power, and so fails to radically problematize liberal society. According to Putnam’s work, democracy does not falter because people’s radical needs may be stifled, but rather, because of its sedentary, self-centered citizenry. Putnam’s argument can only be justified, however, if the given order is indeed experienced as just by the whole citizenry, and the need to oppose, change, and transcend it is superfluous. Nonetheless, given the persistent social and political problems in the United States (poverty, racism, corporate abuses, etc...), it would be difficult for any responsible scholar to make such a claim.

As opposed to the East European experience, therefore, no new public sphere is created according to Putnam’s vision, and he affords no place to the double negativity of individual revolt and systemic transformation. Putnam is actually dismissive of the significance of individual efforts at political engagement and heroism; what good would Paul Revere’s alarm be, Putnam asks, without the networks of civic engagement in Middlesex villages to hear the call to arms (Putnam 2000, 24)? But, without underplaying the significance of civic solidarity, one could easily make the opposite case—without the single cry to arms, the militiamen would have slept through the night.

Contrary to Putnam's emphasis, the power inherent in a single individual has already been demonstrated, especially in a post-totalitarian society. Whether it is Havel's absurd heroism, the actions of an anonymous greengrocer, or the shouts of minutemen in the American colonies, history demonstrates that discounting the power of individuals is a losing proposition.

The real problem with drawing parallels between social capital and East European civil society, as Putnam does, is that the notion and characterization of "social capital" is itself reified, and a particularistic category of the system. By rendering human connections and networks as "capital" which fulfills utilitarian goals while stabilizing and reproducing the given order of things, Putnam effectively de-humanizes civic life. In the Marxian parlance, real human relationships are transformed into *exchange value*; the relationships specific normative content is unimportant. What matters for Putnam is that networks exist and grow, because the more these networks expand the more integrated people can become into the system. The two-fold effect being 1) the system is strengthened via people's acceptance of its rules, and 2) individuals can prosper because the costs of participating in this system are reduced the more they learn to work with others under its auspices. What this glorification of systematized life sweeps under the rug, however, is the real danger that can come with mass mobilization steeped in obedience to authority and established social norms (Putnam 2000, 22).¹¹⁷

On precisely this point, Nancy Bermeo has argued that an active civil society can have anti-democratic (and not merely antipolitical) consequences. Proceeding

¹¹⁷ Putnam offers the example of Tim McVeigh as proof of his self-critical attitude, showing that the growth of social capital creates aberrations as well. But one could argue that McVeigh is not so much a aberration, but the first hints of what may come if Putnam's notion of American social capital is mobilized.

historically with a “normatively neutral” conception of civil society, she and Philip Nord found that, at times, mass mobilization and activism can lead to the decline of democracy and the growth of authoritarianism. In terms of present-day efforts to cultivate civil society, “[t]he problem is to figure out which turn, democratic or authoritarian, civic mobilization will take” (Bermeo and Nord 2000, xxxii). Bermeo points out that

[c]ontemporary social scientists sometimes overlook the heterogeneity of civic life. Robert Putnam’s seminal work on social capital has caused many scholars to emphasize the strength rather than the composition of civil society and to assume a positive association between strong civil society and sustainable democracies. Yet, the general faith in the power of civil society to effect democratic change and sustain democratic regimes may be misplaced if the historical diversity of civil society is overlooked (Bermeo and Nord 2000, 237).

One need only recall Weimar Germany to be reminded of the anti-democratic potentials inherent in civic mobilization, and how networks of social capital are more equivocal than Putnam’s portrayal. In a study of “transnational civil society” and the development of democracy abroad, Thomas Carothers echoes Bermeo’s warning and implicitly describes the fallacy’s of Putnam’s assumptions. Carothers explains that “democracy promoters have held to a denatured, benevolent view of civil society’s role in political life as town hall politics writ large [...]” (Carothers 1999, 248).

This romanticism of civil society has roots in Americans’ rather mythicized Tocquevillian conception of their own society, but it entails a gross oversimplification of the makeup and roles of civil society in other countries around the world. American democracy promoters have made few efforts to understand civil society on its own terms in complex traditional societies in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Carothers 1999, 248).

It is precisely for this reason that great care has gone into re-presenting the East European experience. One, therefore, must remain ever mindful of the challenges that both Bermeo

Putnam assumes American values to be overwhelmingly good and benevolent; but who is to say what lurks below the surface of an apathetic or self-centered culture?

and Carothers pose to scholars that would universalize—and not merely generalize—their vision of civil society.

By presenting the foundations of East European civil society as they were imagined and created, we make a clear departure from Putnam's vision of social capital and civic mobilization. In a disturbing way, Putnam's social capital, and its ethos of trust grounded in reciprocity, could be mobilized to support nearly any regime type and social system. What is crucial for Putnam's social capital is that people are networking, that they are finding those connections useful, and that they gain satisfaction (both monetary and normative) from being so connected. As such, social capital comes down to enthusiastically accepting, endorsing, and playing by the rules of the game to get ahead, collectively and personally. In Eastern Europe, the new, independent public sphere, with its dynamic of double negativity, came about because individuals (and then groups) *refused to play the game*. Conflict, agon, and the negating/creating power of individuals acting as citizens, however, are excluded from Putnam's social cosmology. This exclusion, according to Michnik's understanding of civic engagement and democracy, is a clear indication that Putnam's "social capital" has little in common with the East European phenomenon. In an interview that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1968), Michnik writes that democratic engagement

... entails a vision of tolerance, an understanding of the importance of cultural traditions, and the realization that cherished human values can conflict with each other... The essence of democracy as I understand it is freedom—the freedom which belongs to citizens endowed with a conscience. So understood, freedom implies pluralism, which is essential because conflict is a constant factor within a democratic social order (quoted in Elshtain 1995, 96).

What Michnik's arguments demonstrate is that from within civil society, there emerges an alternative source of political power and an acceptable degree of conflict—which is

yet another aspect of civic life that Putnam neglects. The degree and scope of this political power—and the freedom it affords—is the issue that now moves our discussion into the orbit of another constellation of scholars.

To varying degrees, the following scholars attempt to draw some lessons from the East European experience in order to lend a critical edge to their conceptions of civil society. In terms of theoretical nuance and scope, the work of Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato easily rivals that of Putnam. Yet much like Seligman, their work is overwhelmingly about the notion of civil society, although at times it is prescriptive as well. As we shall see, however, these latter, prescriptive moments also demonstrate a serious problem that is common to the civil society literature. Simply stated, the problem is the tendency of this scholarship to lose its footing in history and become a free-floating, meta-theoretical debate over the proper conception or model of civil society. The almost imperceptible passage from theorizing about historical events to arguing over ideal types is, furthermore, a source of the conceptual “hodgepodge” that comprises much of the civil society literature (Heller 2001, 1034).

Turning to the work of Cohen and Arato, what one generally finds is a highly stylized and imaginative interpretation of the *notion* of civil society. While it was Seligman’s intent to reach into the concept’s history to articulate what civil society once meant, Cohen and Arato include and go beyond the idea’s history, adding the insights of such contemporary thinkers as Foucault and Habermas to the conversation. In their massive collection of essays, Civil Society and Political Theory (1992), the authors also make references to Eastern Europe, and claim to draw valuable lessons from the democratic opposition’s experience. The stated intentions of Cohen and Arato,

furthermore, appear to be in tune with the critical—even emancipatory—spirit of the East European democratic opposition. In a shorter essay titled “Interpreting the Notion of Civil Society,” Jean Cohen writes

... the movement of civil society is itself a new kind of utopia: the normative principles underlying it, plurality, publicity, legality, equality, justice, voluntary associations, and individual autonomy, constitute a self-limiting utopia that calls for a plurality of democratic forms, a complex set of social, civil, and political rights compatible with a highly differentiated society. It also calls for what I label a self-limiting, radical politics” (Cohen 1995, 37).

Yet, despite this promising statement of purpose, what is disquieting about their reading of East European civil society is illustrated in the following statement: “While the total democratization of state and economy cannot be their goal, civil society itself, as Tocqueville was first to realize, is an important terrain of democratization, of democratic institution building” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 16). The question that immediately comes to mind is “why not?”—Why is democratizing the state and economy not part of the goal, especially given the arguments of Heller, Havel, Konrád, and so many others? Even if it is a goal that would be nearly impossible to wholly realize, why can *the total democratization of society* not be an ideal to strive towards? As we shall see, the reason for Cohen and Arato’s assertion has less to do with the historical experience of Eastern Europe and more to do with their theoretical commitments.

As Cohen and Arato’s model of society and arguments regarding civil society unfold, their work appears to have an exceedingly idealist (not idealistic) character. Although idealism is no sin—especially if we are discussing political theory—it does impose important limits on the arguments in question. Ironically, Cohen and Arato are compelled to answer a nearly opposite charge in their writings; that is, the charge of “soullessness” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 451). In their response, they declare, “[w]e can

thereby link the project of radical democracy, reinterpreted in terms of our notion of ‘the plurality of democracies,’ to some key institutional premises of modernity” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 451). But if they can be absolved of soullessness due to this claim, then the charge of idealism becomes all the more easy to demonstrate. As they say in the statement above, they are involved in the work of “reinterpretation;” Cohen and Arato’s work is meant to theoretically mediate between what radical democracy was in the past and the ideational premises of modern institutions. This mediation, developed through their long meta-theoretical arguments and a critical re-working of Habermas’ theory of communicative action, certainly yields a theory of civil society. Yet this theory seems to be based primarily on other theories, and not necessarily on the historical experience of civil society, in Eastern Europe or otherwise.

In the shorter essay, Cohen diagnoses the problem from which their larger collaborative work proceeds. She writes that

[...] only a concept of civil society differentiated from the economy could become the center of a critical theory in societies where the market economy has already developed its own autonomous logic or is in the process of doing so (Cohen 1995, 36).

To accomplish this, Cohen and Arato formulate a *tripartite model* of society, in which the economy and the state occupy their own social spheres, and both are distinct from the sphere of civil society. The authors argue that their “proposal for reconstructing the politics of civil society as a reflexive continuation of both the democratic revolution [1989] and the welfare state becomes important for East and West, especially for actors hoping to save something of ‘the spirit’ of the democratic transition” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 489). Cohen and Arato put forward two theses to characterize the work that needs

to be done to attain this end: the first is to “institutionalize civil society in the widest possible sense,” and the second states that

[t]he civil society needed to reproduce democratic political culture can be developed and defended only through a double process of limiting the colonizing tendencies of the administrative state and market economy and establishing new forms of social control over these subsystems (Cohen and Arato 1992, 498).

But getting the economy and/or the state out of civil society and into their own social spheres is not accomplished by merely theorizing them out, which is essentially what Cohen and Arato attempt to do.

At first glance, Cohen and Arato’s tripartite model may appear as an innovative, even critical contribution to the civil society literature. They propose that within the three respective spheres (economy, state, and civil society) actors pursue their respective interests and fulfill their duties. Distinguishing it from the economic and political spheres, Cohen and Arato characterize civil society as a

... sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication (Cohen and Arato 1992, ix).

Cohen and Arato are explicit about the limits of the political power that resides in civil society. Actors in civil society are limited to speech acts, protest, and the generation of influence, which is meant to place pressure on the state and economic institutions. Political parties, and other more formally political entities, are located outside civil society, occupying an intermediary space between civil society and the state (i.e. political society) (Cohen and Arato 1992, ix-x). The authors also want to stress that “under liberal democracies, it would be a mistake to see civil society in opposition to the economy and state by definition” (Cohen and Arato 1992, x).

Based on this vision of civil society—and society in general—the charge of idealism takes on serious weight. The problem is not that Cohen and Arato are abstractly theorizing about real political problems, but rather that they are abstractly theorizing about pseudo-problems. This is because their project of imagining a concept of civil society separate from the economy does not deal with the real issue. It would have been a different matter if they attempted to imagine a way to *get the economy out of civil society*, because, as Seligman and Habermas have made clear, it is already there—and has always been there. The only instance in which the economy was not part of civil society was in Eastern Europe, which may mean that what occurred in Eastern Europe was not civil society at all (strictly speaking). To include the East European version of civil society in this discussion, the dissident critiques and opposition to capitalist economic and democracy lacking direct, popular control must be taken seriously. That, however, is contrary to Cohen and Arato's stated goal. As they see it, civil society is not opposed to the liberal economy or state *per se*, they are only opposed to it being in civil society. But simply imagining economic power out of civil society, and conceiving of such neat divisions within liberal societies in general, is not merely meta-theoretical fantasy, but a form of idealism run amok.

This idealism leads to a few corollary problems: the first is directly grounded in the dynamics of the model. If civil society is to have no formal political power, how is it to defend itself from economic encroachments—assuming that the economy is out of civil society? In a similar vein, Krishan Kumar rightly asks:

How can civil society protect itself against the state? Must its independence rest simply upon the disinterested benevolence of the state—a most insecure basis. If however, the autonomy of civil society is, as [John] Keane says, to be “legally guaranteed,” who but the state will be the guarantor of this guarantee? And if the

state is derelict in this self-imposed duty, what kind of sanctions against the state do citizens possess (Kumar 2001, 154)?

Civil society's lack of political power to formally check the state and economic institutions is compounded when the economy's power in the state is considered. After all, just because Cohen and Arato separate the economy from the state in theory does not mean that it is so in practice. It is along these lines that Chantal Mouffe offers an insightful criticism of Cohen and Arato in her book The Democratic Paradox. Mouffe argues that despite Cohen and Arato's claims to support pluralism, they fail to "show how the capitalist system in its present stage of big corporations constitutes a fetter to the development of pluralism and the enhancement of individual freedom" (Mouffe 2000b, 297). Echoing many of the East Europeans' own critiques of consumerism and capitalism's power to stifle pluralism, Mouffe seems to better reflect the concerns and ethos of East European civil society. It appears, therefore, that Cohen and Arato's 'critical theory' of civil society is not critical enough to push past the limits of really existing liberalism, and, subsequently, also falls short of offering anything that approximates the radical democratic legacies of East European civil society.

To be fair, the problem does not completely lie in Cohen and Arato's delimitation of civil society to influencing the other spheres of society. While this is a relatively weak political position to have, the historical position of East European dissidents was not altogether different. They had no real political power, save their voices and bodies. But what the democratic opposition did engage in is cut out of the realm of possibility within Cohen and Arato's conception of civil society. According to Cohen and Arato's formulation, the pursuit of radical needs (needs that transcend the given system) and the transformation of the other spheres of society are not permitted. In their de-radicalized

vision of society, it seems that there is no place for the expression and realization of radical needs. Their tripartite model actually becomes a narrowly defined political totality, which, in terms of civil society, makes a place for pluralism and expressions of human freedom, debate, and disappointment, so long as such expressions do not overstep their specific social sphere's bounds. Sadly, on these grounds, their critical theory amounts to nothing more than a call to reform liberalism rather than an attempt to criticize and move beyond its ideological and institutional limits. This is clearly formulated in their dismissal of immanent critique (p. 457), the radical power of the individual (p. xvii), and the claim that anything beyond the confines of their model (with regard to the role of civil society) will lead to "antipolitics" at the cost of politics (Cohen and Arato 1992, 563). By "antipolitics," Cohen and Arato seem to mean something different from the antipolitics of the East European dissidents; what they have in mind here is illiberal politics. But then does it follow that the East European democratic opposition was *illiberal* because it was animated by immanent critique and radical political engagement? If by illiberal we mean "against really existing liberalism," then, to a certain degree, yes; but if by illiberal we mean "against liberty," and against other Enlightenment values common to both the liberal and socialist political traditions, then the answer is clearly no.

Yet there still is much confusion on this point within the civil society and democratization literature. In *The Future of the Liberal Revolution*, Bruce Ackerman lauds the revolutions of 1989 as "liberal revolutions," yet has this to say of 1989's most prominent hero:

Havel's anti-enlightenment philosophy [...] will not make it easy for him to give intellectual expression to his liberal instincts. What ever good he may do in

Czechoslovakia, he will not challenge Westerners to take the possibility of liberal revolution seriously” (Ackerman 1992, 33).

Considering that no one denies that Havel fought for freedom and democracy, the *liberal Enlightenment philosophy* that Ackerman claims Havel lacks must be of the political-economic sort (i.e. really existing western liberalism)—and he is correct. As was demonstrated earlier, Havel is not a champion of capitalism or consumerism; but, for the most part, the democratic opposition never claimed to be “liberal” in this sense. Ackerman overplays his hand, going to great lengths to convince his readers that East European civil society and the revolutions of 1989 were events belonging to “the activist tradition of modern liberalism” (Ackerman 1992, 11). By going so far as to call Havel’s thought anti-enlightenment and a potential danger to the revolution—the revolution that Havel was imprisoned for, suffered for, and in many ways, the revolution that he lived—Ackerman demonstrated that he has misunderstood the spirit of the democratic opposition.

On a similarly fallacious note, John Ehrenberg also considers the East European democratic opposition and the revolutions of 1989 to be forces that restored liberalism in the East—although for Ehrenberg this is lamentable. In his Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea, Ehrenberg acknowledges that the democratic opposition did not actually intend on restoring liberalism, but

[n]o matter how promising some developments appeared, it was soon clear that the intense hostility to the state that characterized Eastern European conceptions of democracy and civil society was bound to open the door to the market. It proved impossible to think of a ‘socialist civil society’ apart from the logic of capitalism (Ehrenberg 1999, 192).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Of the East European opposition, Ehrenberg further argues that “...their elevation of autonomy, individual interest, and particularism serves to protect the economy from democratic scrutiny or supervision. It is not ‘civil society’ that is restored in Eastern Europe—it is *capitalism*.” (198)

But in this assessment we are faced with two unjustified leaps of logic. The first is Ehrenberg's assumption that the introduction of markets necessarily means capitalism. Whether we turn to Heller or Havel, the existence of markets is not taboo, so long as there is democratic control or management of the economic institutions that participate in those markets. Capitalism is more than the existence of functioning markets; it is also an ideology and practice that is governed by values that often clash with autonomy and human dignity. Markets have existed in all human societies; capitalism, however, is a historically specific form of social organization. For the second leap, Ehrenberg assumes that the democratic opposition was interested in a "socialist civil society." As was said earlier, the democratic opposition was not interested in reforming or 'saving' really existing socialism; that dream died with the demise of the Prague Spring. Yet, if this is so, could both Ackerman and Ehrenberg ultimately be correct (for different reasons) in their assessments of the democratic opposition and the revolutions of 1989?

To this question, Jeffrey Isaac responded in the negative. Despite acknowledging the liberal interpretation of East European civil society and revolutions of 1989, he considers it politically and morally flawed.¹¹⁹

It is politically flawed because it marginalizes and/or ignores important forms of politics that were practiced by the Central European democratic oppositions, forms not adequately covered by liberalism. It is morally flawed because, in doing so, it prematurely forecloses some very complex questions about the meanings and legacies of 1989, thereby precluding certain important avenues for political action. More specifically, it minimizes the importance of nonelectoral, nonparliamentary forms of political activity—in particular the kinds of civic initiatives that played an important role in resisting communism—in opposing authoritarianism and constituting genuine spaces of democratic politics (Isaac 1999, 127).

¹¹⁹ Isaac maintains this position even in light of former opposition members' statements (such as Janos Kis and Adam Michnik) soon after the fall of communism (Tismaneanu 1999, 130).

Thus, rather than favoring a liberal interpretation, we need to first understand the democratic opposition on its own terms. Based on what the opposition called for, we can then assess it from the perspective of the radical, humanist Left. John Keane offers precisely such a characterization; while sensitive to the concerns raised by Isaac, Keane challenges the interpretations of Ackerman and Ehrenberg.

To be an intellectual or political sympathizer or activist of the Left, I argue, is to recognize the complexity of the world, to suspect and reject ideologies of every kind, to see the need to democratize the idea of socialism through the prism of the old state-civil society distinction, and to be in favor of social and political systems that display a rich plurality of self-governing civil society institutions legally administered by, and held accountable to, democratically organized state institutions (Keane 1998, 68).

After identifying such a Left-oriented project at the heart of the opposition, Keane then articulates a new understanding of East European civil society. This characterization is neither wholly liberal nor Left, but harmonizes the radical, emancipatory legacies of East European antipolitics and cherished Enlightenment values.

Pursuing this argument, we return to civil society as it was understood by East European activists, and are further drawn into the orbit of Keane, as well as other similarly motivated scholars. In Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions (1998), Keane summarizes the arguments of his previous efforts¹²⁰ and proceeds to work through what he considered to be the legacies of East European civil society. For our purposes, Keane's characterization of East European civil society is of primary importance; it highlights the dynamism as well as the fragility of this unprecedented political phenomenon. In terms of theorizing civil society, he warns that "civil society can not be treated as a universal language game in the traditional sense" (Keane 1998, 54). This is more than just a criticism of theorists such as Cohen and Arato, who take their cues from

a Habermasian inspired vision of civil society grounded in communicative action. Beyond this, Keane is putting forward a post-foundationalist understanding of civil society. In doing so, he is in good company; not only does he cite Linz and Stepan's support of such an understanding of civil society,¹²¹ but such a conception places Keane in the same philosophical orbit as Dick Howard, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Agnes Heller, and even Theodor Adorno. Keane explains that

[t]he term 'civil society' is a signifier of plurality. It therefore must attempt to break with the bad monist habit of philosophically justifying civil society by referring back to a substantive grounding principle, such as the early notions of God-given justice, natural rights or the principle of utility, or their late modern counterparts of rational argumentation (Habermas), principles of 'the right to equal concern and respect' (Dworkin), respect for 'the worth of the individual' (Hall), or knowledge of a 'good which we can know in common' (Sandel) (Keane 1998, 54).¹²²

As such, civil society is always a historical situated phenomenon, which means that it is not only historically or contextually constituted, but, through individuals and groups, it can also impact upon historical situations, bringing political change. Keane makes this argument throughout his works, emphasizing that although the language of civil society was adapted in powerful ways under really existing socialism, it "applies equally well to such disparate phenomena as the decline of the welfare state, the rise of neo-liberalism, and the growth of social movements" (Keane 1998, 7).

Keane's post-foundationalist conception of civil society is particularly well attuned to the defining characteristics of East European civil society. With regard to a

¹²⁰ Democracy and Civil Society (Keane 1988); Civil Society and the State (Keane, 1988).

¹²¹ (Keane 1998, 46).

¹²² Keane continues, addressing scholars such as Seligman: "The post-foundationalist understanding of civil society also takes care of the objection that the old ideal of civil society nowadays resembles a drunk wandering in darkness in search of a lamppost; or, as Adam Seligman has more soberly put it, that the early modern notions of civil society, which rested upon beliefs in 'Godly benevolence and in natural sympathy... are no longer ours to share, and we can no longer use them to construct our models of the social order'" (56).

new, independent public sphere, Keane's conception highlights the fact that civil society is solely grounded in the engagement of 'the public' of which it is constituted. This engagement does not necessarily have to take the form of speech acts, nor does it have to swear allegiance to any political or metaphysical doctrine. Rather, as was the case in Eastern Europe, the public sphere was constituted by people's pursuits of their radical needs—by expressions of autonomy and the hope to be recognized by others. As such, individual and systemic negativity has a place in Keane's vision as well.

Thus, the connection between our nonidentical totality and a post-foundationalist conception of civil society is increasingly clear; being post-foundationalist, nonidentity (once again, ironically) is the grounding principle of civil society, and democracy in general. Keane affirms that "[d]emocracy has no metaphysical guarantees. It is certainly not written into the nature of things" (Keane 1998, 46). And therein lies its fragility and dynamism: it is at once immanently "wreckable" [Keane's term], as well as immanently transformable. In his positive summation of civil society, we can clearly see that the pursuit of radical needs is an acceptable expression of the pluralism Keane has in mind. In a more programmatic than descriptive statement, Keane explains civil society as

one possible approach that nevertheless boldly accentuates the need for giving greater emphasis to both theoretical pluralism and a political project bent on enabling a genuinely non-hierarchical plurality of individuals and groups openly and non-violently to express their solidarity with—and opposition to—each other's ideals and ways of life (Keane 1998, 55).

In last analysis, what Keane offers is not so much a single conception of civil society, but rather an argument against any single conception;¹²³ by illustrating the dangers and

¹²³ Keane's conception shares a great deal with Michael Walzer's understanding of civil society as well. Preferring the admittedly awkward "critical associationalism" to the term civil society, Walzer writes that "[c]ivil society itself is sustained by groups much smaller than the demos or the working class or the mass of consumers or the nation. All these are necessarily fragmented and localized as they are incorporated.

possibilities inherent in the dynamics of civil society, he is able find the East European democratic opposition's power center, as well as envision how civil society can carry democratic politics beyond its current practice.

In contrast to Keane, Barbara Falk's *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe* (2003), treads overwhelmingly on the side of historical specificity, with a few expeditions into the rarified air of philosophy. Falk's study offers a history of dissident ideas interspersed with accounts of the contextual circumstances from which these ideas emerged. The cast of characters that appear on her stage is impressive, and in terms of analysis Falk's study goes to great lengths to make an accounting of the essays, theoretical tracts, debates, literature, and poetry that emerged in the flying universities and samizdat presses throughout the Bloc. Taking her cues from Jeffrey Isaac's *The Strange Silence of Political Theory* (1995), an article which criticized the American Political Theory establishment for not paying attention to the East European revolutions of 1989, Falk sought to document and discuss what she called "dissident political theory" (Falk 2003, xxiii). Her purpose, ultimately, is to assure that the ground is properly set for taking East European dissidents seriously as political theorists. She writes

[s]upport for my argument that dissident thought should be taken seriously *as political theory* is reinforced every time public intellectuals, social critics, and political theorists build on the arguments of Havel, Michnik, and others and in so doing extend the influence and contemporary relevance of the East-Central European *oeuvre* (Falk 2003, 348).

They become part of the world of family, friends, comrades, and colleagues, where people are connected to one another and made responsible for one another. I have no magic formula for making connections or strengthening the sense of responsibility. These aren't aims that can be underwritten with historical guarantees or achieved through a single unified struggle. Civil society is a project of projects; it requires many organizing strategies and new forms of state action. It requires a new sensitivity for what is local, specific, contingent—and, above all, a new recognition (to paraphrase a famous sentence) that the good life is in the details" (Walzer 1995, 27).

In light of this, it is not much of a criticism to say that, for the most part, Falk's theorizing ends with the ideas of the intellectuals in question. Her stated intention was to discuss dissident political theory, and not to build a *political theory of dissent*—or radical engagement for that matter—out of the East European oeuvre. The creation of political theory based on the ideas of East European thinkers is what she calls for, and thus, in many ways this work answers that call.

At this juncture, to quibble over theoretical terminology or minor variances in interpretation in her text would not be very fruitful. For the most part Falk resists the pitfalls of painting East European dissent into essentialist or liberal corners. Some of the more substantial problems with the study occur when Falk's pursuit of broad philosophical scope is achieved at the cost of depth and nuance. Statements such as “[u]nlike Locke, Hegel, and Marx, the dissidents did not focus on property forms or protections” reveal Falk's occasional reductionist tendency (Falk 2003, 324). Lumping Locke and Hegel together is already problematic, whether one is discussing property or civil society; adding Marx to the mix makes any single coherent conception of property and civil society a philosophical disaster. But rigorous philosophical exegesis is not where Falk's contribution lies. If one wishes to read a meticulously researched history of East European intellectual trends, ideas, summaries of dissident writings, and the various connections to western thought, then Falk's work is excellent. Despite the fact that Falk's book parallels Tismaneanu's Reinventing Politics (1992) and Grzegorz Ekiert's The State against Society (1996), it does add a new dimension of analysis to the East European dissident literature. Furthermore, although Falk does not formally identify the

defining characteristics of East European civil society advanced here, they are latent in her recounting.

With this said, it is time to answer the call—the challenge to theorize along with and even beyond the activists of the former Eastern Bloc, in order to imagine a new, independent public sphere that moves to the rhythm of its own radical democratic double negativity. To do so we must now return to the three crucial aspects of East European dissent that mediated between subjective revolt, democratic engagement, and a still-uncertain future.

Three Core Aspects of the Democratic Opposition Revisited

Among the many insightful observations Marx recorded about the Paris Commune, the following one is instructive as we reconsider the core aspects of East European civil society.

It is generally the fate of completely new historical creations to be mistaken for the counterpart of older and even defunct forms of social life, to which they may bear a certain likeness (Marx 1978, 633).

This is precisely the case with East European civil society. Today, the “civil society” that emerged in the Bloc countries is largely mistaken for either an *anti*-political (i.e. *apolitical*) phenomenon that could not deal with real power once it was laid at its feet, or a social movement whose aim was the restoration of liberal democracy. Part of the reason for these misinterpretations come from the democratic opposition’s use of the term “civil society” itself. At the time it must have seemed like the perfect discursive signifier and political symbol. Its ability to strike a note with western ears while, more immediately, communicating a new political event to the people in the region was tremendous. At once, the most appealing legacies of European Enlightenment culture

were reinterpreted and mobilized in the service of a new, radical emancipatory movement.

It is at this juncture, however, that our analysis must create some critical distance from the event of East European civil society and its current interpretations. Following Kumar's lead, we can acknowledge the significance of the term "civil society" to those involved in the democratic opposition, but now

...we must ask what the concept of civil society adds that other more familiar concepts do not already cover, perhaps more adequately. If we are concerned with the abuses of power, with recognizing and promoting pluralism and diversity, with defending rights and enabling individuals to act politically, what is wrong with the language and terms of such concepts as constitutionalism, citizenship, and democracy? None of these, it appears, needs to invoke the concept of civil society. All deal, both in the traditional and in the newer literature, with precisely the problems that seem to preoccupy the advocates of civil society. This seems particularly the case in Eastern Europe, where both in the Soviet Union and in the former communist states the overriding problem seems to be democracy: how to achieve it, how to institutionalize it. The agreement on a democratic constitution, one might say, is the necessary condition of political progress in the region (Kumar 2001, 159).

The challenge that Kumar issues is one that needs to be taken seriously if we are to do justice to the advances achieved by the democratic opposition in Eastern Europe. Yet, if we are to choose other, more familiar concepts over civil society, then citizenship, democracy, and constitution all need to be revised to properly reflect the radicalization such concepts underwent. Thus, while Kumar is certainly on to something, the solution to properly communicating the legacies of the democratic opposition can not be found in merely the adoption of different terms.

How then is the East European variant's radical core to be brought to the surface from beneath the mystified "hodgepodge" that is the current debate over civil society. As was said before, this radical core had three distinct yet interrelated aspects, all of which

came together to realize a new, independent public sphere that was animated by a double negativity. But the re-presentation of these three aspects—the strategy of new evolutionism, the structures of the parallel polis, and the ethos of antipolitics—should not distract us from the larger issue. These aspects made up the actual crossroads at which subjective revolt constituted real political relationships and social movements based on autonomy and human dignity. The political relationships were radically democratic and the very embodiment of an emancipatory political project that learned how to overcome the means/ends dilemma that undermined so many previous attempts at radical-yet-democratic social change. Based on these relationships the historic movements such as Charter 77, KOR/Solidarity, and so many others were able to strive for change—and, most impressively, achieve it.

The Strategy of New Evolutionism—What is to be Done?

Although Adam Michnik was not the first, or the only, critical Marxist to realize that Moscow would never permit the *humanization of socialism*, his cognitive and existential turn was among the most inspiring.¹²⁴ After the crushing of the Prague Spring, he (along with many others) understood the need to imagine a new course of action that would pursue change but also not instigate the all too decisive wrath of the Brezhnev Doctrine (Michnik 1985, 144). Out of this radical need a vision of engagement was born that would come to have immeasurable significance for the democratic opposition. In the essay “A New Evolutionism” (1976), Michnik boldly formulated and disseminated what other critically minded activists were already working out in their own terms. Although

¹²⁴ With regard to the political situation in Poland at the time and the issue of existential choice, Michnik writes: “The conflicts between the public and the authorities showed the illusory character of the hopes held by both the revisionists and the neopositivists, and placed them in a situation in which they had to make a dramatic choice. When there is open conflict, one must clearly state a position and declare whose

Michnik's voice was but one of the many circulating in Samizdat publications, his essay proved to offer an uncommonly eloquent, clear, and compelling articulation of a new strategy for political opposition.

Overall, Michnik's essay is very much in tune with the antipolitics called for and exemplified by Havel in the previous chapter. As opposed to a maximalist revolutionary push for social change, Michnik calls for a gradualist strategy of opposition.¹²⁵ While remaining committed to exacerbating the internal contradictions of really existing socialism, the essay called for activists to prudently take advantage of instances when the regime would make grand gestures to political ideals, but in actuality would tolerate much less. Michnik (among others) realized that to oppose the regime, all one would have to do is live up to its rhetoric; this is because the communist regimes could never deliver on what they promised. This was not unique to Poland, Czechoslovakia, or any country of the Eastern Bloc. With regard to Yugoslavia and the rhetoric of "self-management," Zizek explains that

... the official media deplored people's indifference, escape into privacy, and so on—however, it was precisely such an event, a truly self-managed articulation and organization of people's interests, which the regime feared most. A whole series of markers delivered, between the lines, the injunction that such official exhortation was not to be taken too literally, that a cynical attitude towards the official ideology was what the regime really wanted—the greatest catastrophe for the regime would have been for its own ideology to be taken seriously, and realized by its subjects (Zizek 2001, 91-92).

Given this insight, Michnik's new evolutionism raised the project and momentum of subjective revolt to the level of organized political strategy. As a result, the regime steadily (if slowly) lost ground to the democratic opposition, despite its continued

side one is on—that of those being beaten up or that of those doing the beating" (Michnik 1985,142). Being a former critical Marxist, he too was faced with self-critique of his revisionist aspirations.

practice of using fear and intimidation to prevent its subjects from asking for the real spoils of the workers' paradise.

In more specific terms, Michnik's essay offers a diagnosis of the political situation after the eradication of revisionism, articulating an alternative form of action beyond the given structural limitations. Until 1968, there were two paths people could follow if they wished to pursue political change; there was the course of *revisionism* or *neopositivism*. Although much has been written about revisionism thus far, it is worth restating its basic characteristics: revisionism was a political project on the part of reform-minded Party members who sought to resolve the contradiction between the humanist ideals of socialism and its brutal Stalinist implementation in their respective countries. Neopositivism, on the other hand, was a strategy whose proponents undertook to "play the game" while biding their time, hoping to be in position at the opportune moment to assume political leadership. Unlike revisionism, "... neopositivism took for granted Poland's loyalty to the USSR while at the same time rejecting Marxist doctrine and socialist ideology" (Michnik 1985, 136).

To use a metaphoric comparison, if one considers the state organization of the Soviet Union as the Church and the Marxist ideological doctrine as the Bible, then revisionism was faithful to the Bible while developing its own interpretations, whereas neopositivism adhered to the church but with the hope that the church would sooner or later disappear (Michnik 1985, 136).

Besides the fact that both these options only offered change from above, they both entail collaboration with the powers that be to one degree or another.¹²⁶ Thus, the pursuit of

¹²⁵ As Michnik argued, "Revolutionary theories and conspiratorial practices can only serve the police, making mass hysteria and police provocation more likely" (Ibid., 142)

¹²⁶ On this point, Michnik writes: "Where the conflict is open, consistent revisionism as well as consistent neopositivism both inevitably lead to unity with the powers-that-be and assumption of their point of view. To offer solidarity with striking workers, with students holding a mass meeting, or with protesting intellectuals is to challenge the intraparty strategy of the revisionist and neopositivist policies of

radical needs, and overturning the dictatorship over needs, is *ipso facto* out of the realm of possibility for both revisionism and neopositivism. Thus, if these were the two available roads down which one could travel for change, they were both wholly inadequate. The pursuit of radical needs, therefore, demanded an equally radical solution to the problem of political praxis; what Michnik came up with was the strategy of new evolutionism.

It should come as no surprise that the working-class and “consciousness” is at the heart of Michnik’s new evolutionism. Being an intellectual whose own political consciousness flows from critical Marxism and secular humanism, the significance of reflexive self- and political consciousness is often assumed a priori.¹²⁷ With regard to the actual strategy of new evolutionism, it begins with the exercise of reflexive consciousness in order to formulate a critical evaluation of what is possible in terms of opposition and political change. When it is taken up as a political strategy, this consciousness becomes phenomenal—it becomes a political force manifest in the actions of its partisans, critical intellectuals and the working class (nearly everyone but the government). A political force, however, that is painfully aware of the consequences of exceeding Moscow’s absolute limits. Since Michnik thought it was best to avoid revolutionary violence and bloodshed, he was clear not to advocate actions that would incite Soviet military responses similar to those of 1956 and 1968. But, Michnik cautioned, the matter was more complicated than merely avoiding a repeat of the past. Due to past animosities and the feeling of desperation in Poland, Soviet military

compromise. Social solidarity undermines the fundamental component of both strategies: acceptance of the government as the basic point of reference” (Ibid., 142).

intervention in Poland *a la* Hungary or Czechoslovakia would have meant full-scale war between the Soviet Union and Poland.

It would be a war that Poland would lose on the battlefield but that the Soviet Union would lose politically. A victorious Soviet war with Poland would mean a national massacre for the Poles, but for the Soviets it would be a political catastrophe. This is why I believe the Soviet leaders, as well as the leadership of the PUWP, will go far to avoid such a conflict. This reluctance delineates the area of permissible political maneuver; this alignment of interests defines the sphere of the possible (Michnik 1985, 144).¹²⁸

The critical consciousness of the opposition's real political limitations, therefore, also was an important part of the strategy of new evolutionism.

With this said, it is also noteworthy that endeavors in the newly defined *sphere of the possible* were not aimed at the regime; they were aimed at the people. "I believe", Michnik wrote, "that what sets today's opposition apart from the proponents of those ideas [revisionism and neopositivism] is the belief that a program for evolution ought to be addressed to an independent public, not a totalitarian power" (Michnik 1985, 144). Thus, the targets of the new evolutionism's practitioners were two: the field of tension that stretched between what the Party would and would not tolerate, and obliterating the limits that the system had established in the minds and everyday lives of its subjects via organized political action. It may be an oversimplification to say that the strategy of new evolutionism is "new" because it is aimed at the people and not the regime, and it is

¹²⁷ With regard to Michnik's political consciousness, he writes that it "flows from these two traditions: that of rebellious communism, represented by Kurón, and that of independent secular intellectuals, like [Jan Jozef] Lipski" (Michnik 1998, 31).

¹²⁸ When recalling the situation and new strategy of dissent after the 1989 revolutions, Michnik explained that "[t]he self-limiting revolution was a certain political philosophy; it was our only chance, we had no other. We knew that we couldn't win a fight against the Soviet Union, and that our chance lay in the Russians' fear of occupying Poland—as Poland might then become their second Afghanistan. So I defended compromise, self-limitation, and harmony. But if the Russians ever occupied the country, they had to know that they'd be spitting blood" (Ibid. 1998, 62).

evolutionary because of its self-limiting, gradualist character, but it is certainly an adequate understanding from which to begin.

The guidelines for such action are now the most pressing matter; how was this strategy of dissent to walk the high-wire of tactical self-limitation without tumbling into the pitfalls of Soviet military repression or insignificant levels of resistance? The burden of responsibility that came with advocating this nearly impossible task, furthermore, was colossal. The last thing Michnik wanted was to precipitate unrestrained street-violence and upheaval. Embedded even in the tone of his essay is Michnik's reluctance to move too quickly ahead with his call for a new effort of resistance. He prefaces the seven points that outline the new oppositional strategy with a frank assessment of the political situation as a whole:

In my opinion, an unceasing struggle for reform and evolution that seeks an expression of civil liberties and human rights is the only course East European dissidents can take. The Polish example demonstrates that real concessions can be won by applying steady public pressure on the government (Michnik 1985, 142).

Yet, despite the seemingly reserved sentiment of this opinion, the principles that Michnik lays out are anything but timid—they mark the process by which this new conception of emancipatory revolt passed from the noumenal to the phenomenal realm of everyday political life.

As was said above, the working class (ironically) is where Michnik begins with his new strategy, and not merely because it was somewhat of a euphemism for the entire population of a country that claimed to be socialist. Drawing on the effectiveness of working class protest in Poland since the Party's rule began, Michnik argues that

“[n]ew evolutionism” is based on faith in the power of the working class, which, with a steady and unyielding stand, has on several occasions forced the

government to make spectacular concessions. It is difficult to foresee developments in the working class, but there is no question that the power elite fears this social group most. Pressure from the working class is a necessary condition for the evolution of public life toward a democracy (Michnik 1985, 144).

A necessary condition it may be, but working class pressure alone is not sufficient; the foremost philosopher of the working class' power knew that a new political consciousness was also necessary for the success of mass working class action. Michnik, therefore, implicitly agreed with Marx; his second principle states that this new strategy will need to proceed down a difficult road, and that it "requires that fear be overcome and that a new political consciousness be developed" (Michnik 1985, 144). Michnik's suggestion for aiding the development of this new political consciousness was one that even Lenin could appreciate: the creation of "authentic workers' institutions and of models and traditions for political resistance" (Michnik 1985, 144). At its inception, Lenin's model of the revolutionary vanguard party was meant to be precisely such an institution. Now, authentic worker's institutions were being formed to resist the defunct Leninist "worker's state." Sounding a nearly Lukacsian note, Michnik writes that "[t]he day the first independent organization for workers' self-defense was founded [KOR], when the strike committees in the shipyards of Szczecin and Gdansk were formed, a new stage in worker consciousness began" (Michnik 1985, 145). Thus, the three main ingredients to the "timed-bomb" spoken of by Kurón had been mixed in the minds of the democratic opposition: critically minded individuals created new bonds of dignified solidarity, which were to be solidified in the formation of their own political institutions and movements. "[W]hen such institutions emerge," as Michnik presciently points out, "the vision of a new evolutionism will become more than just a creation of a mind in

search of hope” (Michnik 1985, 145). They will be, in fact, the realization of people’s radical political needs in the form of new expressions of democratic politics.

But the structural and institution pieces of this picture comprise the second core aspect of East European civil society’s foundations, and therefore, will be discussed after the other principles of the new evolutionism are presented. So far we have working class power and a new political consciousness, with the call for structural support to shore up both. The third principle of new evolutionism has been already mentioned: the gradualist approach. This gradualism should not be mistaken for faint-heartedness. It is rather, the notion that political pressure can move boldly but prudently through the preexisting cracks in the regime’s façade. If a revisionist, or more likely, a party pragmatist emerges who would seek a compromise with the democratic opposition to better his own status, the opposition would use this opportunity to secure a concession from the Party. But Michnik warns that such a person does not really care to help the opposition, and has no reason to struggle for political change; it is self-interest, advancement, and the avoidance of bloodshed that such apparatchiks seek. “That is why,” Michnik reasons, “he can be a partner of the democratic opposition, with whom it will be possible to reach a political compromise. But he will never be a political ally” (Michnik 1985, 146). With regard to political compromises, the fourth principle of new evolutionism also states that “[t]he democratic opposition must formulate its own political goals and only then, with those goals in hand, reach political compromises” (Michnik 1985, 147). This further guarantees the newness and independence of the democratic opposition.

The fifth and sixth principles of Michnik’s strategy address the public dimension of this initiative’s efforts. Specifically, the fifth principle calls for the creation of mass

political actions, which aim at transforming really existing socialism's reified everydayness into a radically charged political web of emancipated interaction. "The democratic opposition," Michnik declares, "must be constantly and incessantly visible in public life, must create political facts by organizing mass actions, must formulate alternative programs. Everything else is an illusion" (Michnik 1985, 147). Drawing on the rich tradition of "insubordinate intellectuals" that Polish, as well as western culture has, Michnik turns to *the intelligencia*, claiming that it is their duty to help organize and formulate such alternative programs. While he cautions against the overestimation of this sometimes-dubious social group, he believes that of late many have turned an important existential and political corner in terms of their Leftist commitments. For this reason, Michnik writes, that those intellectuals' voices which are raised in the name of the democratic opposition, "albeit weak and sporadic, are nonetheless authentic: they form an independent public opinion, with nonconformist attitudes and oppositional thought" (Michnik 1985, 147). Most importantly, despite the provisional title of "intellectuals," these are people who lack the social privileges typically associated with public intellectuals in the west. Instead of shuffling between posh lofts in New York City's Greenwich Village and cottages by the shore, they enjoyed the first class accommodations of their respective country's prisons and the various bans against their work. Nonetheless, the responsibility placed on intellectuals to help organize, guide, and often *be* the public face of the opposition is the sixth principle of new evolutionism.

The seventh principle of the new evolutionism has the future in mind, but has its eyes fixed on the present. It is often thought by western scholars that "[i]n despotic communist and fascist states, it has been an imagined future land of liberty [that] has

given dissidents and rebels a high-octane engine of revolt” (Barber 1998, 4). Although this assessment might have been true of past rebels and revolutionaries, it is misplaced when applied to the members of the democratic opposition under communism. Despite Michnik’s musings on the possible society just beyond the horizon, the present is where he pins his hopes for this new strategy:

... “by living in dignity,” opposition intellectuals are striving not so much for a better tomorrow as for a better today. Every act of defiance helps us build the framework of democratic socialism, which should not be merely or primarily a legal institutional structure, but a real, day-to-day community of free people (Michnik 1985, 148).

This last notion not only largely discredits Ackerman’s triumphal liberalism and leads us to reconsider the emancipatory, radical democratic character of East European civil society, but also clarifies the target at which the new evolutionism took aim.

The Parallel Polis: Building an “Outside” within the System

Although Michnik was referring to KOR in Poland specifically, his following comments are applicable to almost every Bloc country where democratic opposition existed:

Simply put, [the] behavior [of the democratic opposition] is the combination of a relentless struggle for human rights and a refusal of violence. This had an enormous influence on social behavior in Poland, on the society’s self-education, on the appearance of a new type of social link, and on the diffusion of a new democratic model (Michnik 1998, 5).

This new social link and democratic model is the second core aspect of East European civil society: it is the *parallel polis*,¹²⁹ so coined by Czechoslovak Catholic philosopher Václav Benda in an essay bearing the same title. The essay was originally published in

¹²⁹ Parallel Polis is but one name for the then emerging structures which supported the democratic opposition. In the Czechoslovakia they were called parallel or independent societies, in Poland, the self-organization of society, in Hungary, second or alternative society, and in the Soviet Union, they began as human rights movements and later were known as informal groups (Skilling and Wilson 1991).

samizdat in May 1978, and was soon joined by numerous responses by other activists and members of Charter 77 (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 41). In many ways Benda's essay addresses and expands upon what was mentioned in the second principle of Michnik's new evolutionism. As the noted scholar of Czechoslovak resistance, H. Gordon Skilling, explains the informal institutions of the parallel polis were directed at society, not the regime, and aimed at offering authentically independent institutional support to opposition initiatives and movements (Skilling and Wilson 1991). Keeping with the gradualist, moral/non-violent, and pluralist strategy of dissent proposed by Michnik, and espoused elsewhere by many, was also part of the parallel polis' *modus operandi*. Skilling points out that the parallel polis was imagined, and actually functioned, as informal, dynamic, non-bureaucratic, and open (pluralistic) communities that, much like Charter 77 before it, invited all who longed for the development of autonomous and dignified everyday life to participate (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 5-6).

Benda's impetus for writing the essay was the decline of Charter 77's energy and public profile after its initial success, partially attributed to the death of Charter founder and "spiritus movens," Jan Patočka.¹³⁰ Chronologically, therefore, Benda's essay comes after Michnik's new evolutionism and Charter 77, and before Václav Havel penned his masterful essay *The Power of the Powerless*. According to Skilling, and evident in the essay itself, Havel "endorsed and expanded" Benda's notion, writing "of citizens who, by attempting to 'live within the truth,' contributed to what might be called 'the independent spiritual, social, and political life of society'" (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 5). Furthermore, despite the accusations of naïveté and idealism by some observers, and even Skilling's assessment that "[t]he concept of a parallel society often had a mythical or romantic

aspect which seemed to relate more to the future than to present realities,” parts of the parallel polis were already present all around them. From the samizdat press, to the underground jazz and rock concerts, to the production of absurdist plays, to the flying university courses conducted in people’s homes, to the more formal initiatives like Charter 77 and KOR (just to name the most obvious),¹³¹ the parallel polis was a real phenomenon that merely lacked coherent articulation. As the leading Chartist and Protestant philosopher Ladislav Hejdanek confirms, “an ‘alternative culture,’ independent of official structures and of Charter 77, was already a fact of life” (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 6). It was Benda, however, who gave voice to the grander vision of a new, independent public sphere’s structural architecture.

But could a single articulation of a parallel polis capture the heart of a new evolutionist like Michnik and still attract a man like Petr Uhl, a self-proclaimed revolutionary socialist who thought the parallel polis ought to be a

... ‘revolutionary *avant-garde* of a new type,’ capable of carrying through a revolution against the bureaucratic dictatorship and offering ‘a prototype of the forms of democracy of society-wide self-administration’ (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 6)?

While Uhl’s end sounds remarkably similar to Michnik’s, the more maximalist tone of the above statement might actually place Uhl at odds with new evolutionism. Benda believed that his essay addressed the concerns of both tendencies and offered a practical, long-term plan for accomplishing such change (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 37). The unifying force at the center of the parallel polis’ structures was an irresistible moral commitment and mission to oppose the abuses and deceptions of the system. As such,

¹³⁰ Patočka died under the “stress of interrogation” while under arrest for his involvement with Charter 77.

¹³¹ We could quickly add the Committee for the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS) and, later Solidarity in Poland, Movement for Civic Freedom (HOS) in Czechoslovakia, and the Free Democrats in Hungary.

we can trace a clear line of ascent from the first acts of individual heroic revolt against the system in the name of autonomy and human dignity to the albeit *informal formalization* of new political structures (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 36). This rising tide of revolt and responsible engagement was broad enough to include the positions of both Michnik and Uhl, while not reducing either to their lowest common denominator.

Turning to the more structural character of the parallel polis we find that it was not an entirely new political phenomenon; there were other historical instances where alternative, informal social institutions were formed to compensate for official inadequacies or to challenge abuses. One example from the region's own recent experience is found in Czeslaw Milosz's recollections of Poland under Nazi occupation.

In The Captive Mind, Milosz writes:

... the cultural life of the country refused to be stifled. Underground publications were mimeographed on the run or illegally printed in a small format that was easy to circulate. Many underground lectures and author's evenings were organized. There were even underground organizations of plays. All this raised the morale of the beaten but still fighting nation (Milosz 1981, 88).

While all this sounds strikingly similar to what has been described as the parallel polis, there is a twofold difference: never before has this effort occurred in response to communism, nor has it been so adamantly committed to nonviolence. Thus, from an uncompromisingly moral basis, Benda suggested that the various opposition groups and individuals

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 humanize them (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 36).

In terms of the overall purpose of the parallel polis, there is little doubt that Benda makes common cause with Michnik, Uhl, Havel, and even Heller. In a rejoinder to the samizdat

essays that responded to his initial text on the matter, Benda writes, “[a]s I see it, the strategic aim of the parallel polis should be rather the growth, or the renewal, of civic and political culture—and along with it, an incidental structuring of society, creating bonds of responsibility and fellow-feeling” (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 55).

With this said, the *antipolitical*, structural and functional components of Benda’s proposals can be revisited. Partially inspired by ancient Greece (polis) and partially by what was commonly referred to as the “parallel economy” (black market), Benda offers six points which he claims to be listed in no particular order. The points themselves address the function of the parallel polis, since the actual physical space of the parallel polis is relatively well-known by the then East European reader: the backrooms of cafes, people’s homes and flats, church basements, and typically wherever else was available. As we shall see, the function often implied a certain type of space over another—i.e. a jazz concert might require a basement, while an apartment was enough space to hold a seminar on politics.

The first stated function’s spatial requirements could range from one person’s writing desk to a mass demonstration. The immanent critique of the regime’s ideology was a constant source of power for the opposition and a perpetual irritant for the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Calling this point a preamble to all others, Benda explains that

[o]ur 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 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 systematically against us (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 37-38).

What makes this statement of immanent critique different from previous ones is that first, it exploits legal contradictions that arise, and second, Benda recognizes that the same tactic could be turned around by the regime and used against the opposition.¹³² Nonetheless, he goes on to say that the “transition from the principle ‘whatever is not expressly permitted is forbidden’ to the principle of ‘whatever is not expressly forbidden is permitted’” can be achieved “only by continually testing the limits of what is permitted, and by occupying the newly won positions with great energy” (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 38). In one way or another, the other branches of the parallel polis all assisted in the project of immanent critique—in terms of thought and praxis.

With regard to this task, Benda cites the “Second Culture” as “the most developed and dynamic parallel structure.” Examples of this second, cultural function of the parallel polis includes Václav Havel’s plays and the music of the Plastic People of the Universe—the band whose harassment sparked the creation of Charter 77 (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 38). Benda believed that this parallel structure not only deserved the utmost popular support, but also that it would serve as a model for the other parallel structures. Particularly, for the third listed function of the parallel polis: the development

¹³² An important aspect of this struggle were the Helsinki Accords on issues of human rights; specifically, the Helsinki Final Act (1975) which was “a political agreement among thirty-five states participating in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe” (Thomas 2001, 4). Among the signatories were the Communist Bloc countries, who participated in an effort to better their international image. In his study of the Helsinki Accords’ effects on dissent and the demise of communism, Daniel C. Thomas explains that “this document established ten basic principles for relations among the participating states, including ‘non-intervention in internal affairs’ (principle 6), and ‘respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief’ (principle 7)” (Thomas 2001, 4). In terms of immanent critique and opposition, this was one more set of promises that either the regime would have to deliver on (begrudgingly), or, if denied, serve as relatively safe grounds upon which the opposition questions the legitimacy of the regime. Whether the Party leaders signed the Accords to improve their image or not, by affirming the agreements regimes of the Bloc officially ensured “the individual’s freedom of expression, association, and travel, among other rights; and that individuals and independent associations had a right to monitor their implementation” (Thomas 2001, 119-120). While the regimes did not always make good on their vows to respect human rights, their violations of the Accords was a matter they could not hide—not from their own subjects or from the international community.

of parallel education, scholarship, and science. Insisting on the importance of such parallel institutions, Benda goes so far as to write “I feel that here in particular there is room for us to aim high with a maximalist programme” (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 38). Of course, together with a parallel culture and educational system, a parallel means of communication is crucial. This fourth function of the parallel polis is regarded as an “informational network” which, to some extent, already existed. Benda counseled that, to keep the networks open, they must be used regularly, and are better overloaded than underutilized. The parallel polis’ fifth function dealt with the financial support of such activities. While not precisely the same as a black market, the parallel economy sought to 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” (Skilling and Wilson 1991, 39). The last function of the parallel polis may have sounded supremely unrealistic at the time, but in retrospect, was actually quite visionary. Benda imagined that a parallel foreign policy would internationalize the democratic opposition’s cause, and, therefore, attract support from abroad. Thus, along with this precursor to transnational civil society, we can see a shadow city take shape alongside the reified structures of officialdom’s everyday life.

What we should resist doing at this juncture is call the parallel polis “civil society.” It was, nonetheless, the skeleton that propped up the sinewy arms of popular movements that achieved revolutionary change in 1989. Skilling is correct in saying that to consider the democratic opposition “civil society,” in the sense often used by western scholars, two fundamental conditions are necessary: the legal recognition of independent, oppositional social groups, and the popular democratic control of the state (Skilling and

Wilson 1991, 17). Although such conditions did not exist until late 1988 in Poland, and 1989 in the rest of the Bloc, the parallel polis did create and expand networks of alternative and pluralist consciousness and praxis. These networks were themselves based on nothing but the will, needs, desires, and hopes of the people who learned to think and live beyond the limitations of the system. The crisscrossed and often chaotic web of new human relationships, political initiatives, and liberated physical spaces all bore the imprint of a flourishing radical imagination, and the willingness of people to change their world. Most importantly, participation in the parallel structures was synonymous with the practice of citizenship in a free polis.

Antipolitics as Negative/Creative Political Ethos

For all that has been said thus far about strategy and structures, the reality of the democratic opposition was somewhat more amorphous. The neat laying out of principles in essays is one thing, transforming such ideas into reality is another matter. Although there is no denying that the democratic opposition was ultimately successful in precipitating change in Eastern Europe, its developmental process moved to an atonal, staccato rhythm. As Georg Konrád explained:

The East European strategy is loose, individual, biological. It grows in the direction of the possible; it feels its way along the path of least resistance. It is cautious about formulating things too explicitly, it doesn't say everything straight out, it avoids open, institutional, sharply defined forms. It moves relentlessly, mysteriously, tortuously; it can wait a long time, then suddenly spring (Konrád 1984, 116).¹³³

¹³³ A point which demonstrates the incompatibility between the highly (and tactically) ironic East European dissidents and the Habermasian inspired scholars of communicative action and civil society. To satisfy the requirements of communicative action and the "ideal speech situation," it is assumed that the statements made by speakers are (1) "...true (or that the existential presuppositions of the propositional content mentioned are in fact satisfied); (2) that the speech act is right with respect to the existing normative context (or that the normative context that it is supposed to satisfy is itself legitimate); and (3) that the manifest intention of the speaker is meant as it is expressed" (Habermas 1984, 99). While there are some statements uttered by members of the democratic opposition that certainly satisfy Habermas' requirements, too much of the rich, ironic, and absurdist discourse of dissent would be disqualified.

Along with this illustration of the opposition's tempo, Konrád also reminded us of the individual's role in this grand enterprise. Against the Communist Party's ideological and political subordination of the individual to precisely the status that Marx ruthlessly criticized—a cog in the social machinery—individual autonomy becomes both a means and a perpetual goal for the democratic opposition. But in a practical sense, the members of the democratic opposition had no roadmap to follow, and, therefore, proceeded cautiously. “The bearer of the East European strategy,” Konrád writes, “is the individual who enters and leaves institutional groupings only conditionally, who is suspicious of everything organized, yet knows that organization is unavoidable” (Konrád 1984, 116). Thus, embedded in the democratic opposition itself were contradictory forces that our Sisyphian heroes embraced; they rebelled against overly-institutionalized societies, but in the process built their own institutions. They rejected politics as it was, but in doing so engaged in political life.

With this, we have already leapt clearly into the third core aspect of East European civil society—the ethos of antipolitics. Georg Konrád, the Hungarian novelist, sociologist, and (playfully) self-described “futurist from the depths of our history,” wrote what is often referred to as the *dissident handbook* in 1984 (Konrád 1984, 217). His Antipolitics, though greatly appreciated in the East, received a mixed reception in the West due to its criticism of the U.S. nuclear weapons policy, foreign policy, and NATO, along with critiques of western consumerism and capitalism. Against the militarism of both western liberal societies and really existing socialism, Konrád asks

[i]s there, can there be, a political philosophy—a set of proposals for winning and holding power—that renounces a priori any physical guarantees of power? Only

antipolitics offer a radical alternative to the philosophy of a nuclear *ultima ratio* (Konrád 1984, 92).

Given the political commitments and policies of both East and West, Konrád concludes that “we cannot expect our freedom from either of them, for neither one is particularly interested in our freedom. We can expect freedom only from ourselves, from our own patient, stubborn efforts to win it” (Konrád 1984, 24).

There was no mistaking the high premium Konrád placed on the fierce independence of those who leant their hands to this fight. Already offering hints of the ethos that buttressed his vision of antipolitics, Konrád writes,

[i]ndependent thinking doesn't serve the bureaucracy or the bourgeoisie or the proletariat; it serves itself, serves the cause of independent thinking. It identifies rebelliously with itself and refuses to undertake any social obligations to anything alien to itself (Konrád 1984, 218).¹³⁴

In expressing its own individuality and independence, however, radical thought and praxis throws its lot in with the strategy and structures of the democratic opposition. What Konrád adds is the clearly articulated notion that “[t]he democratic opposition ought to free itself of [...] abstract, unhistorical outlook[s] and reintroduce into its thinking the ethos of personal moral responsibility (Konrád 1984, 126-127). Although this may sound familiar by now, this call takes on a specifically (anti)political character:

I know of no way for Eastern Europe to free itself from Russian military occupation except for us to occupy them with our ideas. Think about it: in a free exchange of ideas, who will occupy whom (Konrád 1984, 129).¹³⁵

Like Michnik and Benda, Konrád is aware of what is at stake; he knows all too well what the Party is capable of, and thus he subscribes to the wisdom of the new evolutionism.

¹³⁴ He continues this sentiment in another place, saying “[t]he radical intelligence exists for its own sake; it is no essential part of its purpose that anyone should find any use for it. At most, it is useful in the same way as the urinal that Marcel Duchamp once exhibited—to be contemplated rather than employed” (Konrád 1984, 221).

With regard to the field of tension between Moscow's trigger finger and the prospect of opposition, Konrád writes that

[e]xisting authority and independent reflection look at each other with suspicion—the executive and the creator, the censor and the artist.

The power of the spirit and the power of the state are irreconcilable. There is a deadly serious struggle: which will take over the other from within? This is a combat that requires not one drop of blood nor any great commotion, only a clear and constant awareness that here two radically different powers are at work (Konrád 1984, 219-220).

The new evolutionism and the parallel polis were two efforts proceeding from such an understanding; Konrád's antipolitics was meant to be a spiritual/ethical bond that united these and countless other efforts under a common banner.

Thus, despite the dangers, Konrád understood the necessity of political praxis that flowed from independent thought. As was the case with new evolutionism and the parallel polis, Konrád's call to action was directed toward the people and not toward the regime. Though optimistic about the prospects of creating changes in the cultural and political atmosphere in Eastern Europe, Konrád cautions that

[t]his strategy is not an unequivocally enjoyable one. It is a Sisyphean task to toil at the gradual lifting of restrictions which would only be ridiculed elsewhere, to analyze for rational content dogmas which would simply be impossible elsewhere in the context of European rationalism (Konrád 1984, 74).¹³⁶

Yet, it was the opposition's Sisyphean ethos that the communist regimes had so much trouble thwarting. This was because the Party apparatchiks underestimated the

¹³⁵ The connections to Gramsci here are quite palpable; they will be addressed in the concluding chapter.

¹³⁶ The danger and brutality of the "Sisyphean task" of opposition should not be taken lightly. Recalling a conversation with Adam Michnik, and his fate after the declaration of martial law in Poland (and the suppression of KOR/Solidarity), Konrád writes: "Adam is awaiting trial perhaps. 'It's incredible,' he said: incredible that he was able to give a lecture at the Warsaw Polytechnic University on 1956 in Poland and Hungary. The lecture was first rate: he didn't stammer at all; he was sharp, dialectical, and got to the heart of the matter. Then they said he fell madly in love with a great actress. Then they said he was arrested and beaten half to death. Then they said he was all right. What does it all tell us, Adam? You are thirty-five million, but you couldn't pull it off; now what?" (Konrád 1984, 130). Konrád, and Michnik for that matter, answered the question by renewing their vigor for opposition.

democratic opposition's intense commitment to the absolute ideal of freedom; they seemed to not understand the extent to which it inspired the opposition's imagination and regulated their practical endeavors. Furthermore, those who engaged in emancipatory praxis stole much of the regime's justification for oppressive violence by refusing to obtain freedom by direct action against the regime, or at the cost of another's. As Konrád explains,

[t]he goal—freedom—is absolute; the road that leads to it is relative. It is each and every individual's personal road. It leads through a network of communities, linked with one another by ties of spiritual sympathy (Konrád 1984, 75).

It was in the spirit of such an ethos that Konrád went on to reinterpret democratic politics and express the full scope of its antipolitical potential. For this reason, it may be fair to say that Konrád represented one of the leading voices of the parallel structure that Benda thought to be most advanced—parallel culture.

In his lengthy essay, Konrád artistically and poignantly tied together the theoretical, individual, and political sediments of the East European constellation of dissent. Though Konrád accomplished this by threading together countless theoretical arguments, events, and cultural details into a seamless exegetical tapestry, we will touch only on some of the most central to illustrate the ethos of antipolitics. While owing a great deal to Václav Havel's conception of antipolitics, it is clear that Konrád has expanded on the concept.¹³⁷ Together with hailing the authenticity of living in truth, Konrád articulates how antipolitics becomes a social phenomenon with an explicitly inter-subjective political character. *Specifically, it is the political ethos of the emerging culture and democratic/self-managing institutions of the parallel polis.* Antipolitics, as

proposed by Konrád, “is the political activity of those who don’t want to be politicians and who refuse to share in power” as it exists in really existing socialism (Konrád 1984, 230). As a “rejection of the power monopoly of the political class,” Konrád explains that

[w]e ought to depoliticize our lives, free them from politics as from some contagious infection. We ought to free our simple everyday affairs from considerations of politics. I ask that the state do what it’s supposed to do, and do it well. But it should not do things that are society’s business, not the state’s. So I would describe the democratic opposition as not a political but an antipolitical opposition; since its essential activity is to work for destatification (Konrád 1984, 229).

This statement must be read with a clever eye; to depoliticize everyday life, and rid the parallel polis of the influence of the state is a supremely political act. The Party and its dictatorship over needs does not abide pluralism, popular independence, and certainly does not like being told to “live up to its rhetoric and leave us alone.” Of course, Konrád, as well as his friends in the opposition, knew precisely how political they were being. To all those who mistakenly believe this stance to be apolitical, Konrád states,

[a] society does not become politically conscious when it shares some political philosophy, but rather when it refuses to be fooled by any of them. The apolitical person is only the dupe of the professional politician, whose real adversary is the antipolitical. It is the antipolitical that wants to keep the scope of government policy (especially that of its military apparatus) under the control of civil society (Konrád 1984, 227).

The authority and power that the antipolitical wields is, as always, the intensity of his mind, the solidarity of his fellow citizens, the strength of his body, and the integrity of his arguments.

In case there remains any doubt about the democratic opposition’s desire to exceed the limits of both really existing socialism *and* liberal democracy, while building

¹³⁷ With regard to the similarity between Havel and Konrád’s antipolitics, Tismaneanu explains that “[t]hey are both persuaded that a real revolution should begin at the level of the individual, through the instilment of a new sense of dignity, courage, and morality...” (Tismaneanu 1988, 175).

on the better aspects of both systems, Konrád (much like Michnik) describes the politics that is aimed for in no uncertain terms. Opposed to a minimalist Schumpeterian conception¹³⁸ and well beyond the scope of the contemporary liberal/republican models of democratic politics, Konrád explains at length:

For the most part, East European social movements—especially workers’ movements—have not demanded multiparty, parliamentary, representative democracy, but rather workplace self-management and direct democracy. ... In Eastern Europe today, self-management is society’s prime demand wherever one can express such demands openly. It is a matter of common observation that the workers don’t want to exchange their government-appointed managers for capitalist owner-managers. They want chiefs they themselves elect, ones whom they can monitor and who can be replaced... Workplace and local community self-government, based on personal contact, exercised daily, and always subject to correction, have a greater attraction in our part of the world than multiparty representative democracy because, if they have a choice, people are not content with voting once every four years just to choose their deputy or the head of the national government. ... When there is parliamentary democracy but no self-administration, the political class alone occupies the stage (Konrád 1984, 135-137).

These connections to both Heller’s Great Republic and Havel’s radical democratic vision, along with the implicit critique of liberal democracies and capitalism, should not be overlooked.

In all, there are two principles that underlie the ethos of antipolitics. They, in one form or another, have been with us from the beginning of this entire inquiry, invisibly but continually holding this nonidentical totality together in a gentle embrace. They are: the demand for the democratic “self-government” of society, and the longing for “a world order in which respect for the human being in ourselves and in the other person is the dominant value—a dialectic of autonomy and solidarity” (Konrád 1984, 196, 192). Thus, what we are generally finding as we progress through the various sediments of everyday

¹³⁸ In Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (1942), Joseph A. Schumpeter argues that “... the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the

political life in the former Eastern Europe is the phenomenological manifestation of radical, nonviolent, and democratic rebirth of autonomy, human dignity, and political life. From start to finish, therefore, this tale has been one of longing, revolt, and pursuit of radical political needs by ethical means. Or to recall Marx's categorical imperative and the political level of analysis' weak messianic ideal: *to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being* (Marx 1978, 60). Yet, clearly this ideal was only the spark that lit a much bigger fire—it lit the torch which illuminated what possibilities lay just beyond the horizon for democratic politics.

Recapitulation

With the re-presentation of the three core aspects of the East European democratic opposition, we find the foundation upon which East European civil society stood and where movements such as KOR/Solidarity, Civic Freedom, Hungary's Free Democrats, as well as countless other groups,¹³⁹ drew moral and material support. In these core aspects we also see the ideational roots and actual practice of the two defining characteristics of the democratic opposition: the creation of a new, independent public sphere—comprised of its own ethical and institutional character—which hummed with the electricity of a doubly negative political dynamic. Many being both radical and democratic, the members of the opposition breathed new life into the loftiest social and political aspirations of modernity, and they did so without advocating a program of violence to achieve such ends. Although the political level of analysis has been this entire inquiry's culminating point, we must now clarify what these men and women have to offer us today if and when we endeavor to transform our everyday political lives in the

power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter 1950, 269).

direction of our radical needs. To do so, we will now revisit the entire constellation of East European dissent to draw out all that it has to communicate to both scholars and citizens. The fact that we can discuss such a radical—and possibly revolutionary—project within the realm of democratic politics is a debt we owe to the brave men and women of the former Eastern Bloc countries.

¹³⁹ For an especially well-documented study of dissident/activist groups and movements beyond those best known, see [A Carnival of Revolution](#) (2002), by Padraic Kenney.

Chapter 5: A Sort of Homecoming - From the Past's Radical Legacies to the Future's Democratic Politics

Every disadvantage for an individual, since it can no longer be an advantage for anyone else, is now a disadvantage for the whole and for every individual member of the whole and will be felt by each member with equal pain and remedied with the same activity. Every advance made by a human being will be progress for all mankind.

(Fichte 1987, 90)

Whatever it might be, we fight on without certainty, and our virtue, uncertain of any rewards, acquires a profound nobility.

(Kazantzakis 1960, 116)

The Possibility of Radical Possibilities: Hope, Memory, and the Present-tense

Before taking his existential leap into the communist movement, the still *romantic anti-capitalist* Lukács wrote

I hope you still share our old conviction that what was once reality becomes an eternal possibility. Anything anyone has ever accomplished, I must demand of myself—eternally—as an attainable duty, if I don't want to exclude myself from humanity (Lukács 1995, 44).

This implies that the past accomplishments of humanity remain with us, even if they have been momentarily lost in the baleful blind-spot of our everyday political lives. The above quote also suggests two pressing questions: first, having been realized in practice, and having left an indelible—if at times overlooked—mark on the political culture of the 20th century, are the democratic opposition's accomplishments *eternal possibilities* for us today? Second, if the accomplishments of the opposition are indeed our possibilities, what, in a preliminary sense, do these possibilities suggest to us about political thought and practice? By answering these two questions, we can clarify the legacies of the democratic opposition and the lessons therein for challenging the present and creating the future. More specifically, the replies to each of these questions will take shape in two

distinct yet related discussions. The first reconsiders the contemporary theoretical and political relationship between the Left and democracy, and the second explores how the legacies of the democratic opposition correspond with the work of various contemporary thinkers with similar concerns. Although the responses to these questions serve as this inquiry's general conclusion, they may also form the prolegomena to a new direction of democratic transformation—in both theory and praxis.

In searching for a response to the first question, it was fruitful to return to the young Lukács once more. Demonstrating his own appreciation for the Absurd character of human endeavor (successful or not), he once wrote that “[e]verything that happens may be meaningless, fragmentary and sad, but it is always irradiated by hope and memory” (Lukács 1971c, 126). This somberly optimistic assessment seems to place a great deal of weight on rather ethereal notions. But for Lukács, “hope” and “memory” have a much more substantive character than they would at first appear. With regard to hope, Lukács explains that it “is not an abstract artifact, isolated from life, spoilt and shopworn as the result of its defeat by life: it is a part of life; it tries to conquer life by embracing it and adorning it, yet is repulsed by life again and again” (Lukács 1971c, 126). This concrete manifestation of hope is observable in the drama of our East European Sisyphean hero. In chapter two, we traced the course of the *particular*, reified, and alienated person's cognitive and practical revolt. Waking up to his radical needs and finding the courage to express and pursue them, he chose himself against the strict personal and political confines that that system instilled in him. Emboldened by the hopes of achieving autonomy and an everyday life with human dignity, our rebellious individual undertook an emancipatory project against his social condition of abuse or

neglect as well. Yet, Heller was very clear about her conception of revolt and *becoming an individual*: she did not promise utopias and redemption, and did not exclude the possibility of new hardships. Revolt and becoming in the direction of one's radical needs, however, was still valued because it was a *good in itself*. It opened up a space of cognitive and practical autonomy for the individual, proving to others that it was possible to live differently, i.e. *living in truth*—distinct from the regime's "dictatorship over needs." In this sense, hope is made tangible, embodied in the objective character of the rebel and his acts. Hope, therefore, perpetuates itself as "what may be possible" for those who have the will to break out of their alienating, socially imposed confines.

The other side to Lukács' proposition was "memory;" much like hope, memory also has a phenomenal character. He proposes that "memory transforms the continual struggle into a process which is full of mystery and interest and yet is tied with indestructible threads to the present, the unexplained instant" (Lukács 1971c, 126). One example of such a site of memory is the *paradigmatic person* presented in chapter three. What linked the theoretical and individual levels of analysis was the argument that Václav Havel was an example (one of many possible) of Heller's theoretical arguments regarding becoming an individual. While it was never his intent to animate Heller's theories of revolt, morality, and ethics, Vaclav Havel did personify a great deal of Heller's philosophical vision. Proceeding from this expression of "individuality," Havel—and so many others—also became a paradigmatic individual; as such an exemplary person, Havel was at once his own authentic creation, as well as a symbol of ethical political engagement which transcended his own specific context. Generally, individuals like Havel became touchstones that now refer our memory to the hopeful

struggles that they once undertook, and, therefore, become an actual aspect of the present moment. Among these East European touchstones, we not only find a theory of radical needs, but also the nonviolent means with which to pursue the fulfillment of radical needs to their ends.

These means became increasingly clear as we followed the logic of Heller and Havel's revolt to the political level of analysis. We found that the break with subjective particularity, ideological dogma, and alienated everyday life became the spiritual and moral basis for the practical political work of the democratic opposition. Memory, furthermore, makes the radiant hope that resided in such politics ours—their legacies become the fragments of hope within which our dreams of political change can find solid ground. Through this dialectic of hope and memory, the dissidents' ideas and actions become points of reference aiding us as we grapple with how to overcome our present day political dilemmas. Ironically, by recalling the extraordinary events of a once dimly lit foreign landscape that admitted few avenues for existential and systemic change, our moment in time can truly become an "unexplained instant" in which the achievements of Eastern Europe's democratic opposition can become our actual possibilities.

But an important challenge to this line of argumentation must be addressed before we can proceed further. The challenge, ironically once again, comes from Heller herself. In a recent essay, "A Tentative Answer to the Question: Has Civil Society Cultural Memory," Heller expresses her doubts about civil society's capacity to serve as a site for the hope and memory that were spoken of above (Heller 2001). In other words, perhaps East European civil society can not serve as a mnemonic touchstone after all. A preliminary response to Heller's challenge would simply recall the reasoning in chapter

four: East European civil society is not really the civil society that is commonly debated, and thus is not subject to Heller's criticism. Yet, because Heller is both a former East European dissident and a current western scholar, she may have accounted for the different expressions of civil society. Furthermore, working through this issue offers another opportunity to make the prior arguments regarding hope and memory more conclusive.

Approaching the matter from the notion of *cultural memory*, Heller describes memory in terms similar to Lukács. By cultural memory she does not mean a society's collective consciousness (or unconsciousness), but rather the symbolic and material landmarks that signify people, issues, or events of singular significance (Heller 2001, 1031). After affirming that cultural memory constructs and maintains identity, Heller explains that

... in modern times—that is, since its very origination—civil society or *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* as such has no cultural memory. But in saying this, I have already stated something more. Expressly, I have pointed to the problematic character of the concept of civil society itself. If civil society has no cultural memory, then it also has no identity (Heller 2001, 1034).

This, Heller states, is because of the hodgepodge that civil society is, and always was—whether in theoretical explication or in everyday practice. “When different people or scholars talk about civil society,” Heller continues, “they talk about entirely different institutions or practices” (Heller 2001, 1034). The summary judgement of her reflections, therefore, posit that

... civil society cannot have a cultural memory, for within civil society particular institutions or activities are unable and unwilling to create cultural memory, given that they have no need for a cultural identity. Still, other segments or institutions within civil society can selectively take on the inherited debris of certain cultural memories to create a cultural memory of their own. Civil society thus consists of

a mosaic of identities and nonidentities, of a mixture of groups that have formed cultural memory and other groups that have not (Heller 2001, 1034-1035).

Thus, civil society as a whole never had, and consistently does not generate a single, coherent cultural memory; it, therefore, lacks an identity that unites all its parts while leaving intact their differences.

Despite this observation, Heller does maintain that “civil society can function without cultural memory” (Heller 2001, 1039). But it is precisely in her explanation of *why* civil society can function as such that we begin to find the way past her challenge.

Heller states that while civil society may lack cultural memory,

... it can operate smoothly through the clashes of interest and cooperation, to limited and future-oriented activities, and to its own short-term memories, without archive and without utopia but guided simply by utilitarian considerations (Heller 2001, 1039).

If this characterization is vaguely reminiscent of certain aspects of East European civil society, it is not coincidental. If we alter the above characterization to say that *East European civil society operated according to the clashes and cooperation of its participants (thus bolstering its pluralist character), and was characterized by (self)-limited but future-oriented activities which were guided by people’s radical needs and weak utopian aspirations*, then we have a civil society with a coherent identity, within which cultural memory can reside. Granted, by now we are speaking about political-cultural memory and not merely cultural memory. But this political culture was not the official political culture of a regime, it was antipolitical. As such a mnemonic repository, it preserves the image and spirit of a rebellious political culture that perpetually placed itself in opposition to society’s tendency to ossify into its given structures and practices. Thus, the East European phenomenon again demonstrates its difference from its western

relative, this time through its ability to remain invulnerable to Heller's critique (at least this one). Furthermore, East European civil society is at least once removed from the civil society hodgepodge of which Heller spoke. At its core, it was a "nonidentical totality" based on the interactive unity of new evolutionism, a parallel polis, and an antipolitical ethos. Although this nonidentical totality was open-ended, thoroughly pluralistic, lacked clearly delineated boundaries, and eschewed a definite teleology, it certainly had a discernible character—and thus, a face to show to the world (i.e. its identity) and a legacy to be remembered.

With regard to this character, presenting it in all its diversity was not a simple task. To highlight the many layers and loci of philosophical thought, individual activity, and political interaction that East European dissent fostered, it was often referred to as a constellation. Every radical node within this constellation, no matter how independent or autonomous, in its own way refracted a common light. Whether it was in the ideas of its thinkers, in the practices of its paradigmatic activists, or in the strategy, institutions, and ethos of its fledgling politics, they all glowed with the light of non-violent-but-radical resistance and democratic engagement. These points of light are now beacons for us who today grope with a nebulous political future. Thus, each point of light is its own site of political-cultural memory, and as a whole, it invests the present moment with a galaxy of radical possibilities.

It is from the depths of this constellation, furthermore, that the Left raises its weary head, draws breath, and beckons to us once more. But this Left that re-appears in the democratic opposition is itself much transformed—it is, first of all, democratic; as democratic in practice as it is in spirit. In other words, the means by which the rebels of

Eastern Europe pursued the traditionally Left-oriented *emancipatory project* corresponded perfectly to the politics for which they longed. Having learned the hard lessons that past Leftist rebels and revolutionaries never cared to, the East European opposition understood that one could not employ violence to liberate society and expect to create a world that was not stained by blood. But this does not mean that they altogether abandoned the tradition of Marx and the radical left either; what the democratic opposition did do was make it their own. The irony in KOR/Solidarity being a mass workers' movement guided by a gifted group of intellectuals who had devised a specific strategy for challenging the state should not be lost on anyone. This is exactly how Marx envisioned the relationship between the Communists and the Proletariat in The Manifesto of the Communist Party. The difference is that the East European radical intellectuals and workers struggled against the so called "workers' state."

In case there is any question as to whose side Marx would have taken in this struggle, Konrád was of the opinion that Marx would have stood by the dissidents, or, to put it differently, on the side of freedom and against oppression. In Antipolitics, Konrád wrote:

Karl Marx is not there behind the Party Secretary, even though his picture hangs on the wall behind him while the Party Secretary talks stuff that would enrage Marx or put him to sleep. Marx is here besides us, and in the midst of all those who have heads on their shoulders and dare to use them (Konrád 1984, 225).

Although by no means a Marxist, Konrád saw in Marx "as great a thinker of democracy as Montesquieu;" but this democratically inclined Marx was not the Marx of Party dogma. Konrád, and many others throughout the block who "dared to use their heads," knew of the Marx who penned lines such as "[t]o democracy all other forms of the state stand as its Old Testament. Man does not exist for the law but the law for man—it is a

human manifestation; whereas in the other forms of the state man is a *legal manifestation*. That is the fundamental distinction of democracy” (Marx 1978, 20). It must have been sentiments such as these that even led Havel, who unequivocally and continually berated Marxist ideology, to say, “I consider myself a socialist. I even think that I have taken something from Marxism” (Havel 1991, 97). What he, and so many other dissidents did inherent from Marx was his radical spirit of critique, a radical conception of democracy, and the often-repeated axiomatic opposition to all instances of unnecessary human suffering. Yet, the democratic opposition also got one up on Marx and Marxists alike; they conceived of a way to undertake all these things without evoking the spectre of violent world revolution.

Building on this Marxian legacy, and the thought of a few others since and beyond Marx, East European thinkers and activists forged their own weapons of resistance. In terms of these weapons, important legacies of Marx’s philosophy were preserved in the Budapest School and the democratic opposition’s strategy and ethos. Some of these Marxian legacies were mediated by the work of Lukács, through his direct influence on the Budapest School. There is, however, another Marxist thinker whose influence had been hinted at throughout the preceding chapters. Although never explicit, it is not difficult to find evidence of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s presence in the core aspects of East European civil society.¹⁴⁰ In terms of the radical possibilities that the East European constellation bequeaths the present, aspects of Gramsci’s thought (together with Marx and Lukács’) are surely among them. This Marxian/Marxist inheritance, however, reaches us today as what Raymon Aron called *progressisme*: that

is, an attempt “to realize progressively, without seizure of power by violence or the dictatorship of a single party, the material, and beyond that the spiritual ends of traditional Marxism” (Aron 1969, 41). An attempt, nonetheless, that is conceived and pursued via means that are both humane and democratic.

Turning specifically to the Gramscian thread that runs through the democratic opposition, we find that what it connects is as important as the thread itself. The Gramscian connection ties together the old Marxian insistence on the power of ideas in political struggle, and the evolved radicalism of the democratic opposition’s strategy, institutions, and ethos. What Gramscian ideas bring to these crossroads are a mediating formulation of the social space and strategy—a bridge that unites certain Marxian insights and a conception of praxis other than a maximalist revolutionary charge. In other words, some of Gramsci’s alterations of Marxian thought are themselves forerunners to the strategy and tactics of the East European democratic opposition.

Writing from the prison of his one-time friend and fellow socialist, Benito Mussolini, Gramsci theorized that a Bolshevik-type revolution would not work in the west. This is because the bourgeoisie were too deeply embedded in the state and civil society—they had what Gramsci called “hegemony” in terms of ideas and culture. This hegemony meant that a popular “frontal attack” (i.e. a war of movement) against the state was bound to fail, and probably would never get off the ground. Thus, a *war of position* becomes the alternative form of combat; this struggle takes place within the realm of *civil society* and is carried out by *organic intellectuals* (Gramsci 1971, 5-23, 238-246). In these three concepts, we find an often overlooked evolutionary path from Marxism to the

¹⁴⁰ Gramsci, along with Lukács and Karl Korsch were the best known early representatives of the Western Marxist tradition. Heller notes Gramsci’s positive reception among the Budapest School thinkers due to his

democratic opposition, which complements Heller and the Budapest School's own theoretical advances.

The *war of position* has a two-fold character—one in terms of ideas and consciousness and the other in terms of key socio-political stations of influence. When a political group, whether it be a social class or opposition movement has attained the dominant position in both senses, they have achieved hegemony. From this hegemonic position, they can attain official political power and order formal political and social life as they see fit with relative ease (Gramsci 1971, 12). *Civil Society*, and at times elements of political society, constitutes the physical spaces in which these struggles over position take place. Gramsci writes:

The massive structures of the modern democracies, both as State organizations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the “trenches” and the permanent fortifications of the front line in the war of position... (Gramsci 1971, 243).

Finally, Gramsci calls those who engage in this war of position *intellectuals*. For Gramsci, every social group fosters the growth its own intellectuals that

give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc (Gramsci 1971, 5).

Organic intellectuals, therefore, are the ideological partisans of each social group or class; they not only seek to disseminate their vision of the world, they also seek out positions in society from which to spread their “good news.” Aside from these organic intellectuals, Gramsci identifies a free-floating group of *traditional intellectuals*, who, being cultural ancestors of now declining social classes, remain specialists in their respective fields

focus on praxis (Heller 1983, 129).

(administrators, scholars, scientists, etc.). Without overtly political or ideological agendas, these traditional intellectuals carry out their duties.

But as was implied before, the war of position is a struggle for any bit of terrain possible (mental and physical), because the more ground a particular group gains the better able it is to further spread its ideas. Thus with regard to the actual work inherent in the war of position, Gramsci explains that

[o]ne of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer “ideologically” the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals (Gramsci 1971, 10).

From precisely this insight, the jump to the East European context is relatively simple. Working backwards through the above concepts, broad social discontent in Eastern Europe gave rise to individuals who expressed in theory, art, and culture the sufferings of people living under communism. These intellectuals worked through social institutions—some already present, others of their own making—to spread a message of hope and resistance, in order to gain the support of those who played by the rules of the game (even if they did not believe in them). Winning more and more people over to the position of non-violent pro-democratic opposition, these intellectuals were able to build and regulate “civil society,” incrementally displacing the hegemony of the Party’s ideology and political legitimacy. This success in the war of position, in turn, helped precipitate a “war of movement,” albeit a non-violent war, that effected revolutionary social change in Eastern Europe.

Yet, there are two important caveats to this Gramscian formulation of the East European democratic opposition. First, when Gramsci discusses “civil society” he does

have the western (and not East European) version in mind. Although the “complexes of associations” which characterize civil society for Gramsci do include the capitalist market, the informal institutions of the parallel polis did serve a similar purpose (i.e. as networks of association), despite their substantive differences. In reality, the democratic opposition was guaranteed hegemony in these institutions because the parallel polis was of their own making. Thus, unlike the bourgeois societies that Gramsci had in mind when he wrote, the place from which the war of position was to be launched in Eastern Europe had to be largely invented. This was because the regimes held the reigns of political power and social control particularly tight after the various Revisionist experiments. Yet, as history demonstrates, the war of position was able to creep out of the parallel polis and into the Party’s factories and shipyards; Solidarity in Poland is, of course, the best example of this phenomenon.

Second, as was discussed throughout chapters two and three, the “intellectuals” involved in the democratic opposition, were not exactly of the Gramscian stripe. Rather than self-consciously engaging in a war of position in order to effect a war of movement, they undertook the project of revolt and resistance in order to live with a degree of autonomy and human dignity. Although they did wish to see the Party turned out of power, such an event seemed unlikely due to the Party’s sheer strength and willingness to use it. Thus, creating autonomous, dignified life was the first priority; it was a momentary fulfillment of their radical needs. The broader political aspect of this endeavor also was fueled by a moral and ethical passion to oppose suffering whether or not it brought down the regime. The moral and ethical stakes of this struggle, however,

were raised by the tactics of the Party. In its own efforts to win the war of position, Žižek explains how

... in the Czech ‘normalization’ that followed the Soviet invasion of 1968, the regime took care that, in one way or another, the majority of the people were somehow morally discredited, compelled to violate their own moral standards. When an individual was blackmailed into signing a petition against a dissident (say, condemning Havel himself), he knew that he was lying and contributing to a campaign against an honest man... We thus had a regime that actually condoned and relied on the moral bankruptcy of its subjects (Žižek 2001, 90-91).

Žižek goes on to explain the counterpoint in this struggle—the symbolic moral and ethical power of Václav Havel’s authenticity. Echoing chapter three’s analysis of Havel’s thought and political engagement, Žižek reminds us of the practical side of Havel’s ethical resistance. “Havel’s notion of authentic ‘living in truth,’” writes Žižek, “involves no metaphysics of truth or authenticity: it simply designates the act of suspending one’s participation in the game, breaking out of the vicious cycle of ‘objective guilt’” (Žižek 2001, 91). Thus, while the absurd, romantic heroes of the democratic opposition may be understood as intellectuals in the Gramscian sense, they were, nevertheless, members of a social group (and partisans of a struggle) which he did not anticipate.

The general character of the democratic opposition’s war of position is evident in their writings and action. Having already touched upon how the parallel polis became an informal network in which individuals could communicate new intellectual and political positions, one can see how this structural edifice supported and disseminated Michnik’s strategic call for an evolution in consciousness and praxis. Similarly, Konrád called for the occupation of Soviet minds with notions of freedom and justice, because he understood that the power of ideas was what grounded Bolshevik legitimacy in the first

place (Konrád 1984, 129, 145, 180-181). Nowhere is the significance of this more eloquently stated than in the writings of Vaclav Havel. Citing some dissidents' overestimation of "direct political work in the traditional sense," Havel expounds on the significance of ideational struggle with the system and Party dogma:

Initially, this confrontation does not take place on the level of the real, institutionalized, quantifiable power which relies on the various instruments of power, but on a different level altogether: the level of human consciousness and conscience, the existential level. The effective range of this special power cannot be measured in terms of disciples, voters, or soldiers, because it lies spread out in the fifth column of social consciousness, in the hidden aims of life, in human beings repressed longing for dignity and fundamental rights, for the realization of their real social and political interests. Its power, therefore, does not reside in the strength of definable political or social groups, but chiefly in the strength of a potential, which is hidden throughout the whole of society, including the official power structures of that society (Havel 1991 159, 149).

This *hidden potential* in which the democratic opposition's power resided, was nothing other than the possibility of their ideas gaining legitimacy—and possibly hegemony—throughout society, and perhaps even within the halls of the Party. Such was the democratic opposition's transformation of the Gramscian war of position; in this altered state it is also passed down to us.

But other than the Gramscian "continuation of emancipatory politics by other means," what additional link is there between the philosophy of Marx and the East European constellation? The answer lies in one of the most quoted passages of Marxian thought: that "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx 1978, 172). Under the reign of the Bolsheviks, the Party's interpretations of Marxism were undoubtedly the ruling ideas. As Konrád explains, "Marxism was Lenin's work, as Marxism-Leninism was Stalin's. ... It is Stalin who deserves the credit for formulating Marxism-Leninism into a closed and sharply distinct State ideology" (Konrád 1984, 220).

Whether due to sincere belief, fear, military support, or sheer cynicism, it was this State ideology that was hegemonic throughout the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Stalin's Marxist-Leninist ideology, and all its instruments of power, 'legitimated' the Party's dictatorship over society and the needs of its subjects. Due to this (at times 'totalitarian') hegemony, it seemed to most that any alternative to the Party's dictates was impossible; such widespread belief made society unripe for resistance or change. A past observation of Marx's seemed to speak directly to this situation: "[a] radical revolution can only be a revolution of radical needs, for which the conditions and breeding ground appear to be lacking" (Marx 1978, 61).

Although it did not intend to, the rise of Revisionism was responsible for the first fissures in the Party's ideological and political hegemony. As Paul Berman explains in A Tale of Two Utopias,

...revisionism's influence was immense. The revisionists pulled the serious believers in socialist ideals out of the official communist ranks, they exposed official communism as a sham justification for power, they revealed the Soviet Union as an occupying power instead of the liberator that it claimed to be. All of which proved devastating to the official Communists. Revisionism was the leak that could not be plugged (Berman 1996, 223).

Building on the clefts in the Party's hegemony created by Revisionism, the democratic opposition gained ground in the war of position, and lit a fire which ignited people's radical imaginations. As the fire spread, so too did an unhappy consciousness which called for new ideas about everyday life and politics. These ideas, and the actions they inspired, spread to such a degree that they increasingly displaced the State's ideology and incrementally became the ruling ideas. Unbeknownst to those who fought this war of position, it was not long before their ideas of individual autonomy, democratic politics, and human dignity overran the East European states and gained outright political

hegemony. Yet, it was also not long before the conceptions of radical democratic politics belonging to many members of the opposition were themselves displaced by liberal conceptions of representative democracy and capitalist economics. *Why* this turn of events occurred is a matter beyond the scope of this study, and there already exists a large scholarly literature that offers many competing explanations (Antohe and Tismaneanu 2000; Dawisha and Parrott 1997; Ekiert 1996; Garton Ash 1993; 2001; Gellner 1994a; M. Howard 2003; Konrád 1995).

Turning now to our conclusion's second question, we will revisit the opposition's visions of democratic political and social organization, and see whether or not there are contemporary western thinkers who share some—or all—of their ideas. Bringing the question of the Left's role in the re-emergence of democratic politics in Eastern Europe to a tentative close, we are reminded that emancipatory politics and the pursuit of radical needs is not contrary to democratic politics—it is at its very core. As such, we today who engage in the practice of democracy have something to gain from understanding the radical legacies that are scattered throughout the common political universe stretching between East and West. In many respects, the East European democratic opposition has made radical thought and practice safe for democracy, and has made democracy better by relocating radical thought and practice at the center of democratic politics.

Democratic Politics: Radically Re-conceived, Practically Pursued

The legacies and possibilities inherent in the East European constellation's democratic politics is now the topic of analysis. What this part of the inquiry seeks to find is an indication as to where the democratic opposition's legacies can lead us today. To be surer about where we may be going, we should review where we are coming from.

Based on the preceding discussions, there is little doubt that the notion and practice of democracy has been radically reconceived by the East European dissidents. While there have been radical democrats in the past, none have formulated, and to some degree realized it in the manner of the East European democratic opposition.

In terms of this study's philosophical arguments, we reached as far back as Marx's notion that the democratic constitution must be constantly brought back to the actual people who constitute it, and that everyday democratic politics ought to be an externalization of its citizens. This abstract notion was then significantly formalized in Heller's vision of The Great Republic. Although she presented it as an attainable, if distant ideal, Heller explained the virtues of democratically governing all social and economic institutions by the people who worked therein. With regard to politics, she thought it prudent that parliamentary institutions remain intact but share power with institutions of direct democracy. Alternatively, in his writings prior to becoming president, Havel took an even more radical position by advocating the establishment of direct democracy in all aspects of life. Although Michnik often expresses similar "democratic socialist" tendencies, he did write that parliamentary democracy should serve as a necessary minimum. Michnik, however, also did add that parliamentary democracy

...can indeed be extended to other forms of democracy but that we can't exchange parliamentary democracy for the dictatorship of the proletariat without abandoning what the French Revolution brought to Europe, namely, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the principle of citizen's equality before the law (Michnik 1998, 35).

Konrád, who oscillates between reserved praise for liberal democracy and sober hope for direct democracy tried to articulate the broader appeal and promise of democracy when he wrote:

A democratic system ... is not a historical necessity; it is the work of human beings, freely chosen, deliberately willed, and artificial, and for that reason it is open and subject to further development. It is a creative imagination applied to social conditions. Democracy contains within itself the contradictions and the dialogue of ideal and practice, utopia and experience (Konrád 1984, 193).

It is perhaps because of this sentiment that in the end, Konrád seems to side with the radical principle of "...democracy within and among all social units;" effectively challenging the Party's monopoly on defining the direction of History, Konrád adds that "... it is up to us to declare that this is the meaning and goal of history" (Konrád 1984, 191).

But are these voices of revolt and democratic renewal now simply hollow echoes fading just out of earshot? What do these ideas mean to us today, and is there anyone in the west—in the U.S.—thinking along the same trajectory? The simple answer, of course, is yes; but the fine details are more complicated. Although there are contemporary western scholars who think and write in similar terms, they do not necessarily draw from the East European experience. Furthermore, although there may be scholars who think along with, and sometimes recall, the advances and innovations of the democratic opposition, there are few if any social movements or activists who draw openly and directly from the legacies of the East European dissidents. The following comments will juxtapose the East European legacies and some contemporary western conceptions of radically-oriented democracy, socialism, and citizenship in order to demonstrate the substantive connections between the two. These connections, further,

can in turn serve as the new ground out of which fresh initiatives for radical-yet-democratic engagement can emerge.

Although the discussions throughout have been framed in terms of democracy or democratic socialism, one may argue that socialism seems to be the truly dominant, if underlying, theme. Why this is not the case will be clarified momentarily. But in so far as a certain conception of socialism was part of the democratic opposition's overall message, it was a conception that mirrored one offered by Norberto Bobbio:

...socialism is a movement which not only aspires to eliminate economic exploitation but also to achieve the emancipation of humanity from all the historical forms of servitude inflicted by fellow human beings and, as far as possible, by nature as well. It therefore cannot help appropriating, and welcoming as its own, those institutions which are based on the principle of autonomy rather than of heteronomy (Bobbio 1987, 97).

Bobbio bases his characterization of socialism on the moral and political sentiments of Marxian thought. He explains, "I can see no other way of interpreting the 'freedom' of which Marx and Marxists talk when they contrast the realm of freedom with the realm of necessity, other than autonomy, i.e. obedience... to the law that which all have laid down for themselves" (Bobbio 1987, 97). In this formulation of socialism, Bobbio affirms autonomy as a fundamental human value and political principle. As a human value, it recalls the East European constellation's first and persistent radical need which moved individuals to rebel against their inadequate and oppressive social conditions. As a political principle it recalls autonomy's intersubjective form (human dignity), serving as the foundation upon which all other political relationships ought to be predicated.

Thus, if autonomy, or *obedience to the laws which all have laid down*, is a political principle common to the socialism of both Bobbio and the East European dissidents, it increasingly clear that socialism so conceived is also democratic in

substance. In terms of democracy, Bobbio makes the argument that the main difference that exists between representative and direct democracy is a difference of degree. In his own radical reassessments of socialism and democracy, Bobbio writes:

I wanted to explode the myth that there were two incompatible forms of democracy, and that of these two forms one, representative, is characteristic of bourgeois democracy and the other, direct, is characteristic of proletarian democracy, a myth which leads to the assumption that, for those who look forward to a society which is both socialist and democratic, the first is bad and only the second is good. ...there is no clear-cut distinction between direct democracy (in its different permutations) and representative democracy. Instead there is a continuum, in the sense that the one shades into the other by degrees (Bobbio 1987, 112).

This characterization has two crucial implications. First, since direct democracy is only a different shade of representative democracy, a strategy of radical evolutionary engagement could transform a representative form of democracy into a more direct form. Thus, the ideals of Heller's Great Republic, and even Havel's radical democracy, are not merely remnants of a bygone era, they are our actual possibilities—not yet reality only by a matter of degrees. Only the radical imagination, longing, and will are lacking to transform these actual potentials into real phenomena. There is, however, no shortage of political abuse, neglect, and human suffering in modern liberal societies to justify the pursuit of such changes. Yet, either systemic political change has not yet been grasped as a possible answer to these problems, or we simply do not recall the time in our own past when it was an acceptable and desired course of action.

What the East European constellation can teach us in this connection is not so much what kind of political system to build in place of the current one, but rather, that radical democratic change in the direction of a society's ideals is possible and worth fighting for. It can remind us that precisely this was conceived of and achieved under the

precarious conditions of really existing socialism, and therefore, it should not be considered impossible or naïve to pursue such change within really existing liberalism. Both normatively and structurally, direct forms of democracy are the as of yet unrealized truths of our representative systems, and they can fulfill people's longing for more power, justice, and dignity in their everyday lives.

The second implication is that even if representative democracy is only different from direct democracy by a matter of degrees, the degrees of difference are not an insignificant matter; they point directly to real instances in which change can occur. The differing degree of political pluralism that characterizes representative and direct democratic models is a perfect example. If we momentarily put aside the issue of democratically reforming economic institutions, we can focus on how the fledgling radical democracy of the East European constellation was also an incredibly pluralist phenomenon. The pluralism inherent in the East European constellation, however, was not altogether of the same type as its western counterpart. In the East European constellation of dissent, the pluralism which emerged was, on the one hand, grounded in people's radical needs, and on the other hand was manifested in the opposition's new, independent public sphere. This pluralism, furthermore, carried with it the double negativity that posed a real challenge to the system. Could the same be said for pluralism in the west today?

If the pluralism inherent in today's liberal democracies shares the qualities of its East European relative, then it would have made serious advances since Marcuse critiqued it in One Dimensional Man. Yet, upon closer inspection, one can still recognize many aspects of today's liberal society in Marcuse's analysis. Marcuse argues that in

contemporary liberal (or late-capitalist) societies pluralism may exist, but it is a *subdued pluralism* (Marcuse 1964, 50). In other words, while liberal societies foster pluralism, the needs and interests of the system delimit the pluralism which is permitted. In a manner that approximates the dictatorship over needs seen in the East, western societies promote and protect expressions of pluralism that mostly correspond to and advance the reproduction of political and economic liberalism.¹⁴¹ Outliers are either suppressed and thus wither, or are assimilated into systemically accepted spectrum, and, therefore, de-radicalized. Although liberalism's pluralism is a much more humane and expansive "dictatorship over needs," Marcuse's (among others) work demonstrated how western societies produce and reproduce administered, *particular* forms of subjectivity as well.

To be clear, even Marcuse does not say that communist and liberal societies are equally oppressive and constraining. He states that

... for the administered individual, pluralistic administration is far better than total administration. One institution might protect him against the other; one organization might mitigate the impact of the other; possibilities of escape and redress can be calculated. The rule of law, no matter how restricted, is still infinitely safer than rule above or without law (Marcuse 1964, 50-51).

But, as was stated above, Marcuse sets his sights on the tendencies in western societies that undermine the full potential of the pluralism they seem to support. Marcuse explains that

[a]dvanced industrial society is indeed a system of countervailing powers. But these forces cancel each other out in a higher unification—in the common interest to defend and extend the established position, to combat the historical alternatives, to contain qualitative change. The countervailing powers do not include those which counter the whole. They tend to make the whole immune against negation from within as well as without... (Marcuse 1964, 51).

¹⁴¹ While antiliberal voices do exist on the margins of U.S. pluralism, it is noteworthy that religious (mostly Christian) fundamentalist groups which oppose multiculturalism and are intolerant of anyone who they claim threatens their values, have gained considerable ground in our political culture.

Thus, the radical, negative aspects of the East European democratic opposition historically have been marginalized or eliminated from the realm of possibility by the ‘systemization’ of pluralism in liberal societies. The ability for pluralistic expressions of radical needs to serve as alternative forms of democratic engagement on the part of citizens is simply discouraged—and even ruthlessly suppressed—by the hegemonic forces of the system and status-quo.¹⁴² This led Marcuse to conclude that western pluralism was increasingly becoming an ideological deception (Marcuse 1964, 51).

Whether increasingly ideological or merely temporarily subdued, western pluralism does not altogether exclude the possibility of activists creating a parallel polis, or pursuing a strategy of new evolutionism. As was indicated above, both representative and direct democracy shares a great deal—including a general political culture out of which an antipolitical ethos could develop. If these three core aspects of East European civil society were to grow in the soil of western pluralism, then the nonidentical totality that characterized their overall presence in the East could also become our political reality in the West. Then, perhaps, democratic change would be close at hand. Of course, this is all contingent on whether or not people first feel the systemic constraints imposed upon them, and then choose to rebel against such constraints. Yet, the obstacle to this in the (albeit delimited) pluralism of late capitalist society is the following: what is cut out of the realm of possibility is often obfuscated by the abundance of other things—i.e. the pinch placed on one’s radical needs is allayed by the manufacture and satisfaction of non-radical needs. That is, the system makes up for the needs that it cannot fulfill with

¹⁴² Consider how it is often deemed ‘un-American’ and ‘unpatriotic’ to question the U.S.’s justifications and legitimacy with regard to its invasion and occupation of Iraq.

surrogates that appease people who are dissatisfied and unhappy. But, as Heller and Feher explain, the hope is that

[t]hose committed to the logic of democracy will be dissatisfied with the present state of affairs where the democratic logic is still to a great extent limited by, and subordinated to, the logic of industrialization and that of capitalism. Driven by this dissatisfaction, they will turn to others, equally dissatisfied with a fettered democracy, to urge them to press for a radicalization of democracy (Heller and Fehér 1988, 15).

A great deal, therefore, is determined by how citizens who feel the claustrophobia of their systemic limitations choose to deal with this matter.

To effect the kind of political consciousness and critical engagement necessary to bring about systemic negativity and change, the first negation must have already happened. There is no shortage of suffering and dissatisfaction in the world, even in the relatively prosperous and stable west. It is only with a serious problematization of one's own condition—one's everyday life—that the first step can be made; the step towards the cultivation of the unhappy consciousness with radical needs. Here too, the radical pluralism of the East European constellation is instructive. Heller theorized how man can rebel against his own *particular*, reified circumstances and condition; Havel, among others, gave us examples of how this rebellion can become a practical reality within any person's grasp. At work within each Heller and Havel's ideas and action is a deeply pluralistic, nonidentical conception of subjectivity itself. It was Adorno's ideal—*to use the strength of the subject to breakthrough the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity*—that was manifested in Heller's individual, Havel's greengrocer, and in the members of the East European democratic opposition writ large. Considering that this was possible in a society that was much more unforgiving than those of the present-day west, why similar undertakings are not pursued, championed, and demanded today remains a mystery.

Perhaps the political significance of such an initial existential revolt is unclear, and too abstract to be taken seriously?¹⁴³ Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, however, did not seem to think so; in their Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, they explain how such radical, pluralistic expressions of subjectivity might play out on the democratic political stage. They write

A democratic struggle can autonomize a certain space within which it develops, and produce effects of equivalence with other struggles in a different political space. It is to this plurality of the social that the project for a radical democracy is linked, and the possibility emanates directly from the decentered character of the social agents, from the discursive plurality that constitutes them as subjects, and from the displacements which take place within that plurality (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 181).

As in the East European constellation, Mouffe and Laclau offer a vision of radical democracy predicated on agents that have rebelled against their systemically prescribed identities. The East European experience has taught us that the mutual recognition of autonomy exchanged by individuals and groups who have entered the political struggle bestow human dignity upon the entire process—even if they are at odds with one another. While Mouffe and Laclau make a similar argument, claiming that such combatants are engaged in an agonistic—but not antagonistic—struggle,¹⁴⁴ their point about “autonomizing” the space of struggle is an important development that may lead out of the one-dimensionality that Marcuse saw in western pluralism.

¹⁴³ As a subsequent inquiry, it would be fruitful to compare the proto-existential writings of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson to the East European constellation in order to recover this all but forgotten legacy of American political culture.

¹⁴⁴ Although there are many nuances inherent in Mouffe’s conception of agonistic democracy, it is enough for our purposes to distinguish between agonistic struggle and antagonistic struggle. *Agon* occurs between political opponents who recognize each other as legitimate (in our case, autonomous and accepting of democracy broadly conceived). While these opponents might thoroughly disagree and seek to best one another in the political arena, neither doubts the other’s legitimacy or right to partake in political life due to their overall commitments to democracy. *Antagonistic* struggle occurs between political opponents who are enemies—that is, at least one of the parties involved do not recognize democracy (and thus their opponent’s commitments) as legitimate. With regard to our arguments, antagonism empties political

Yet, if the arguments regarding nonidentity and revolt of subjectivity against the system (now liberal democracy) are followed to their ultimate conclusions, then we may be faced with a serious political problem. This problem, which was touched upon in all the preceding chapters, becomes more evident in another of Mouffe and Laclau's arguments. Speculating about the radical possibilities in new social movements and identity politics, they write "[w]e are confronted with the emergence of a *plurality of subjects*, whose forms of constitution and diversity it is only possible to think if we relinquish the category of 'subject' as a unified and unifying essence" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 181). With the radical politicization of subjectivity and pluralism, the everyday functioning of democracy can be rattled to such a degree that it is jeopardized—and not merely transformed—as a whole. Although democracy's destruction was not the intention of Mouffe and Laclau, Bermeo's caution regarding the destabilizing effect of political mobilization should ring in our ear as loudly as the radical needs of individuals if we are to remain true to our original intent, the radicalization of democracy and not its radical obliteration.

The thought of Dick Howard offers a solution to the above dilemma. He demonstrates a way to ensure that the radical *politicization of politics* remains the politicization of democracy. Much like Mouffe and Laclau, Howard also presents a vision of politicized politics, but he weaves an important thread through his argument which grounds it more firmly in democracy. In his Political Judgments, Howard states that

[a]cceptance of the demand to go beyond the world as given, and recognition that such a transcendence can never be fully realized, is the precondition for

struggle of human dignity because it does not recognize the other as a legitimate political actor (Mouffe 2000, 80-105).

recognizing why politics must be politicized, why political judgments are always necessary and yet never definitive, and why responsibility is the premise of solidarity among individuals insistent on asserting their rights to their own individuality (D. Howard 1996, xv).

From the above statement it is clear that Howard's conception of politicized politics reflects a great deal of the East European sentiment and ethos. Contrary to the more maximalist temperament of Mouffe and Laclau, Howard explicitly affirms the non-teleological, Sisyphean insight that characterized the East European dissident consciousness, as well as its moral/ethical gravity in his insistence on responsibility for political judgments.

Howard's notion of political judgments should not be confused with the communicative/speech act models of deliberative democracy. Rather, political judgments serve as a way of referring to political praxis broadly conceived. Whether embodied in public declarations, protests or demonstrations, or any other type of public act, political judgments are the means by which politics (and democracy) is *politicized*. Even the existential revolt of subjectivity can be politicized in this manner: as a political judgment, one's subjective revolt can take shape as a public, politicized verdict passed on the system's shortcomings, and *la condition humaine* within it. Then, even if instances of subjective revolt appear on a mass scale, democracy (however agonistic) can remain intact; it is held together by the implicit need for political judgments to be recognized by other citizens whom you respect, and from whom you seek recognition. In this sense, such political praxis is at once meaningful, democratic, and possibly quite radical.¹⁴⁵ Thus, even as subjective revolt and the radical need of autonomy shatters a person's bonds with the given systemic form, the need to have his or her autonomy recognized (to

grant it dignity), is attained through the maintenance of democratic politics in spirit and practice—a spirit and practice held together through the exchange of political judgments.

“Political judgments,” Howard explains, “are the language of democracy; they are what make it different from previous political regimes.”

In a democracy, there is no privileged standpoint from which an ultimate and definitive judgement could be attained. There is no point in time, no place in space, no a priori validity that can be maintained within the constant flux of democratic opinion (D. Howard 1996, xii).

An element of Howard’s conception of democratic politics that brings him further into the orbit of the East European constellation, other than his arguments about political judgments and his anti-foundationalist formulation of democracy, is what he refers to as “the right to error.” This axiomatic precaution is very similar to the dissidents’ impatience with any expression of dogmatism and their insistence on philosophical self-examination. Calling it an often forgotten but democratic right, Howard explains that the right to error inherent in political judgments has both a philosophical and political aspect.

In terms of philosophy, the implication is

... that there is a difference between the way things appear and the way they truly are (or can become). If the way things truly are is not the way they appear, then the claim to know them as they truly are also assumes the risk of error, misjudgment, or of mistaking what we want for what really is. Without this right to error, philosophy is impossible... (D. Howard 1996 xiii).

With regard to politics, Howard explains that the right to error in political judgments works in the inverse manner:

In a democracy, those with whom we disagree politically are not *guilty* of error; our task is not to condemn them but to convince them. We know that we can convince them because democratic citizens who claim the right of error assume at the same time responsibility for their judgments as judgments—that is, as philosophically fallible (D. Howard 1996, xiii).

¹⁴⁵ Personal, as opposed to political judgments, do not need such recognition because (for the most part) are self-directed.

Thus, the overall vision of a politicized democracy that emerges here is not only amenable to the full range of “degrees of democracy” conceivable, it is also in tune with the legacies of the East European dissidents. The notion that the work of democracy and critical political engagement is never completed and never without error reflects the Sisyphean courage and political modesty of the democratic opposition.

But if we are discussing non-dogmatic political action, along with the demand for measured-yet-romantic Sisyphean courage in the task of carrying out such action democratically, then the question of “who” these demands and duties are being heaped upon must be addressed as well. So far, we have discussed the individual abstractly, in terms of subjectivity and nonidentity. Now we must address him or her as a concrete political person, i.e. as a democratic citizen; and it is in her existence as a citizen that the moral, intellectual, and “negative/creative” force of her political judgments becomes the substance of everyday life. It is at this juncture, furthermore, that contemporary radical democratic thought finds its closest connection to the East European constellation. This connection is the irreducible human element in which hope, memory, longing, suffering, critique, and action all unite; precisely the human element that Vladimir Tismaneanu’s essay “Fighting for the Public Sphere: Democratic Intellectuals under Postcommunism” (2000) highlights so well. Directly building upon the public role of the Absurd intellectual-citizen of the former Eastern Bloc, Tismaneanu explains the significance of such forms of engagement for the future of democracy, both in the region and in the west.

Bringing together the moral, critical, and political aspects of their activism, Tismaneanu reminds his reader that

[t]he moral lesson of dissidents (itself a “meta-narrative” of sorts) was not fully grasped and therefore swiftly jettisoned; more than a critique of the monopolistic Leninist regimes, the philosophy of civic emancipation advocated by Eastern Europe’s critical intellectuals bore upon the fate of modernity and our understanding of the relationship between means and ends in the organization of social space (Tismaneanu 2000, 154).

After recalling this dimension of their political activism, Tismaneanu goes on to point out how these men and women adapted to their new political constellation: “critical intellectuals converted into something that was long absent from the East-Central (and arguably West) European experience, namely *democratic intellectuals*” (Tismaneanu 2000, 154-155). There is a double meaning inherent in the term *democratic intellectual*—the first denotes a certain elitist quality, and the second paradoxically exemplifies the non-elitist arguments presented in chapters two and three. In terms of the first, elitist quality, it is necessary to point out that, despite the elevated status such a title seems to confer, no special or official title grants a democratic intellectual a privileged position above other citizens. They are merely men and women who take it upon themselves to be outspoken “moral critics of the existing order, which is always imperfect and calls for improvement” (Tismaneanu 2000, 167). Thus, their elitist aura is wholly an outgrowth of their commitment to boldly enter into public life; if they happen to become paradigmatic, it is because they have ennobled their personal endowments and enlisted them in the service of their cause.

With regard to the non-elitist quality of the democratic intellectual, one must keep in mind that Tismaneanu speaks of a *democratic* intellectual. That is, the possibility of being an intellectual is democratized; one of the great legacies of the East European experience is that it demonstrated how a greengrocer—or more concretely, a Polish electrician who leapt over the fence at a shipyard (Lech Walesa)—could become a public

intellectual and citizen-leader. Of course, it is important to keep in mind Gramsci's sobering observation, that "all men are intellectuals... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (Gramsci 1971, 9). Yet the point that any citizen can, if he or she so chooses, assume the role of a democratic intellectual who makes public political judgments regarding everyday life, makes concrete all that has been previously theorized about subjective revolt and nonidentity. Moved by the upsurge of one's radical needs and encouraged by the open-endedness of democratic politics, any citizen who feels the pinch of systemic pressures can enter the political fray and denounce the inadequacies and unreasonable limitations that hamper individual and democratic development. In this radical practice of citizenship, individuals hope to find others who not only recognize their complaints as legitimate, but who may make common cause with them.

Thus, the legacies of the East European constellation overlap and deepen certain visions of democratic politics in contemporary western thought. In terms of the individual, the thought of Heller and experience of Havel offers battle-tested ideas and methods for politicizing democratic politics in a non-violent but radical manner. By assuming the responsibilities of a democratic intellectual, citizens' publicly expounded political judgments not only "autonomize" social spaces, but they do so in a manner which is non-dogmatic and open to pluralistic political contestation. In a sense, such practices of citizenship can create a new parallel political network, which founds alternative centers of agonistic democratic power. From these alternative positions of power, democratic citizens can challenge the limits of formal politics while not delegitimizing democracy. Adapting Michnik's new evolutionism and Konrad's

antipolitics to the practice of democratic politics in liberal societies simultaneously affirms democratic values and warns us

...against the illusion that a fully achieved democracy could ever be instantiated, it forces us to keep the democratic contestation alive. To make room for dissent and to foster the institutions in which it can be manifested is vital for a pluralist democracy, and one should abandon the very idea that there could ever be a time in which it would cease to be necessary because the society is now ‘well-ordered’ (Mouffe 2000b, 105).

It is by such means that the weak messianic ideals of Heller’s Great Republic and the democratic opposition’s moral/ethical emancipatory power can be transformed from our actual possibilities into our everyday reality.

To bring these arguments to a close, it may be best to draw one last connection to western democratic thought—a connection that frames the legacies of the East European constellation in a more positive, programmatic manner. If we focus on the creative flip-side of the radical negativity that the East brings to the western political constellation, we can also see the fellowship between the democratic opposition’s ideals and political theorist Benjamin Barber’s conception of *strong democracy*. Barber’s own critical re-conception of democratic politics (Strong Democracy 1984), promotes the idea of “self-government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens” (Barber 1984, 151). Chronologically, Barber’s idealistic-yet-pragmatic vision of democracy appeared in 1984, the same year as Konrád’s Antipolitics. Theoretically, Barber’s arguments seem to stand somewhere in between the negative thrust of the democratic opposition and the more philosophical insights of Mouffe, Laclau, and Howard. Underlying his “Strong Democratic Program for the Revitalization of Citizenship,”¹⁴⁶ is the foundational notion that strong democracy seeks to re-invigorate

¹⁴⁶ (Barber 1984, 307).

...politics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods (Barber 1984, 132).

The palpable connections between Barber's strong democracy and the East European democratic opposition further grounds the East European legacies in the American tradition of democracy—and not only in the general western tradition. With its expanded conception of citizenship and its anti-foundationalist formulation of democracy, Barber's programmatic vision prepares the ground for a critical synthesis of Mouffe and Laclau's agonistic pluralism, Howard's political judgments, and the East European dissidents' antipolitics.

Yet, despite all these possible harmonizations, the story of democratic political thought and action would be nothing without its gnawing paradoxes. The one that makes itself felt here is the paradox at the heart of an anti-foundationalist conception of democracy. Despite it being “anti-foundationalist,” democracy requires certain core moral/ethical attitudes (but not necessarily values) that its citizens can not abandon if they intend to practice, and (especially) radicalize it. It is, therefore, an insoluble paradox that such a radical, pluralist, and anti-foundationalist conception of democracy can not function without: *a shared commitment to political engagement based on individual autonomy and its mutual recognition (human dignity)*. Besides being the radical needs of its citizens, this is what democracy itself *radically needs* if it is not to ossify into its caricature. Because these radical needs can never be wholly fulfilled for all time, they can serve as a new ethical/political *minima moralia* that unites all democratic citizens—no matter how much they may differ in their personal hierarchy of values and interests.

This ethical/political *minima moralia*, furthermore, is also the principle by which the Left's emancipatory project is integrated and regulated. By morally tying the emancipatory political project to the redress of undue political suffering or neglect via democratic means, radically-oriented democratic citizens make good on the promise to learn the historical lessons of political excess. Thus, the radical humanism at the core of Leftist thought and politics must proceed democratically if it is going to change the world without terror and destruction. While no political course has Truth, Right, or History on its side in any cosmic sense, this author, in agreement with Howard, concludes that "[t]he solidarity based on responsibility toward other autonomous individuals with whom one shares a common public space is the precondition for confronting the fundamental political question[s] facing not only the revolutions of 1989 but also the contemporary West..." (D. Howard 1996, 24). In the search for answers to the questions that face democratic (and non-democratic) societies, it has been this study's position that the East European constellation of dissent and democratic renewal has much to offer.

Closing Comments and New Projects

This long expedition through the thought, politics, and history of the East European constellation of dissent was undertaken in order to accomplish three general goals. The first was to remind people of the struggles and political achievements of the East European thinkers and activists; to demonstrate that their contributions to radical thought, ethical resistance, and democratic politics extend beyond opposing Leninism and dictatorial regimes into our political constellation. The second goal was to chart the transformation of Western Marxism—from its traditional form to its metamorphosis into the radical spirit of democratic thought and praxis. This reevaluation of the Left, which

began with former critical Marxists, but persisted among post- and non-Marxists in its altered state, recovered the best aspects of this philosophical and political tradition from the depths of indifference and oblivion. Lastly, this study prepared the ground for a new approach to democratic thought and practice. Before us now lies the task of re-visiting the radical moments of our own pasts, in the hopes of salvaging the critical ethos that infused long-forgotten events which led to democratic change in our own respective countries. The East European constellation of dissent, therefore, also holds a candle up to our own past, reminding us why America was once inspirational to so many around the world in a time when it is seemingly admired by so few.

In these three accomplishments, furthermore, are expressions of and contributions to the immanent critique of democracy. In the American Revolution and the experience of nascent American democracy (as imperfect as it was) Adam Michnik saw “the embodiment of the principle of an open society and open nation” (Michnik 1992, 621). “The Revolution,” Michnik also states, “was fought by people who had tasted the bitterness of humiliation and servitude. And it brought about a republic of people who have become conscious creators of their own destinies” (Michnik 1992, 621). This sentiment, even if the realities of early America were somewhat less rosy, was part of the driving force of the East European democratic opposition; by basing their politics on common democratic values, along with radical philosophy, they conjured up images of our past and reanimated them in their own struggles. Based on this, we can formulate an immanent critique of our own democracy. First, the possibilities that the East European constellation endows our present moment will drag to the surface our deepest, most cherished political values: critical individualism, autonomy, equality, tolerance, and a

heavy emphasis on problem solving and practical action. Then, by bringing these values to the surface of our everyday political lives, we not only see how our present moment has fallen short of these ideals, but the experiences of the East European constellation offer radical and democratic means for changing our problematic present into the politics we long for.

Looking at the current situation in the former Eastern Europe, one may say that the dissidents' radical democratic aspirations were merely unrealistic dreams. Western liberalism, including capitalism, seems to have won the day, despite how many opposition members and activists called for political *and* economic democracy. Considering the overall outcome, aside from the few notable exceptions, the establishment of western liberalism is still an undeniable achievement. Given the obstacles that the democratic opposition had to overcome, few believed that democratic politics would ever replace the Party's reign. As Michnik explained long before the 1989 revolutions,

[i]n trying to foresee the future of Eastern Europe one must certainly add that this social process is unlike any other: no one has yet to witness a society with nationalized property, a planned economy, and a democratic and pluralist political structure. "The past sheds no light on the future," wrote Tocqueville, "the mind marches ahead in darkness" (Michnik 1985, 159).

That, however, was then; today it is the experience of the democratic opposition that *does* shed light on the future of democratic engagement and politics. And unlike the circumstances which faced the East European dissidents, the current project calls for the evolution of an already democratic system in the direction of its own ideals.

Evolution, not revolution, therefore, is the watchword that emerges from the East European experience. Although it may be radical, it is *evolution* that the immanent

critique of democracy will bring about if it is endeavored. At the start of his Negative Dialectics, Adorno stated that the *revolution had miscarried*, and that philosophy [critical philosophy/Marxism] was obligated to ruthlessly criticize itself and the world in order to engage in emancipatory praxis once more (Adorno 1973, 3). With the help of Heller, Feher, and the Budapest School—together with the democratic opposition—that ruthless criticism was carried out and a new radical-yet-democratic orientation to emancipatory thought and praxis was crafted. As was argued above, these changes call to us from the recent past, and ask us to remember what democracy offers its citizens: the dignity of self-governance and the shared responsibility for the well-being of society in general. The East European experience also reminds us of the fragility of democratic politics, of how quickly it can lapse into abuse and disarray when its citizens neglect their political duties. The radical evolution of democracy places heavy demands on all parties involved; it is an immense boulder that citizens must perpetually push uphill.

If all this sounds too drastic and dramatized, one need only to cast their gaze in the direction of all those citizens who live in poverty, hunger, and despair. The fact that such conditions persist in countries that are both affluent and democratic, is enough to justify pursuing radical evolutionary change. The reality of autonomy and human dignity is the condition that remains alien for too many democratic citizens. If autonomy and human dignity remain radical needs out of reach for even one citizen in a democracy, then there exists the radical need to transform that democracy. Whether or not such changes will occur, even if people struggle passionately to achieve them, is unclear. But what the East Europeans teach us is that even if the partisans of change do not win the day, the mere attempt at change proves to others that someone believes that it can be

done; their experience teaches us that such a struggle is good, and is worthy of others' support. "The highest virtue," Nikos Kazantzakis once wrote, "is not to be free, but to fight for freedom" (1960, 118). And who knows—if those initial rebellious few can awaken in others a passion for politics and a longing to fulfill their radical needs, then a democratic political culture which continually challenges subjective reification and political alienation could thrive once more. In the end, we live in the world we make, and we make the world we need—whether it is free and thoroughly democratic or inhumane and oppressive.

Every age creates the age that it needs, and only the next generation believes that its fathers' dreams were lies which must be fought with its own new "truths."

(Lukács 1974, 13)

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