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## **The Radical Catholicism of Vaclav Benda: An Enfant Terrible of Czech Dissidence**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the political philosophy of Vaclav Benda, one of the main protagonists of the Charter 77 dissident movement in Czechoslovakia. Little-known outside of the region, Benda's work is a unique synthesis of a radical critique of Czechoslovak socialism and political Catholicism. I will discuss in particular both the spiritual origins of Benda's "conservative radicalism" and the strong role of the Catholic church in the post-1989 "Decade of spiritual renewal" that he envisioned. Though Benda's thought contains a conservative element of moral intolerance, attention to his contribution to the dissident movement and post-'89 Czech politics reveals both the heterogeneity of a movement primarily known for the liberal thought of Havel and Patočka, as well as a unique form of Central European radical theology.

The social movements Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland were among the key actors in criticizing the Communist regimes in Central-Eastern Europe in the period leading to 1989. Their public dissidence has been connected primarily with a number of well-known figures who became the public intellectuals and icons of such movements – Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, Jan Patočka...<sup>1</sup>

Other, lesser-known figures are, however, little known in the West. One of the main visionaries and organizers behind the Charter 77 movement was a mathematician and a political philosopher; in his own words, the "conservatively radical" Václav Benda.<sup>2</sup> His name and role in Czechoslovak dissidence is unappreciated outside Central Europe, and yet he is a key figure, one whose thought is dramatically different from his fellow, more

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<sup>1</sup> See Tucker on the philosophy of Czech dissidents.

<sup>2</sup> "Because of the need to use existing labels, I call – to the great discomfort of my leftist thinking friends – my political concept conservatively radical." (Benda, 1980:279)

famous dissidents. The only text by Benda that is known in the West is “Parallel polis,” in which he envisions a non-governmental social order that would function outside and in parallel to the Socialist State. Havel, in his famous text “Power of the Powerless” wrote of Benda’s central role in the development of Czechoslovak dissident philosophy:

“If the basic job of the dissident movements is to serve truth, that is, to serve the real aims of life, and if that necessarily develops into a defense of individuals and their right to a free and truthful life (that is, a defense of human rights and a struggle to see the laws respected), then another stage of this approach, perhaps the most mature stage so far, is what Václav Benda called the development of ‘parallel structures’ (192).

In this talk, I will focus on a number of little-known essays by Benda that have not been translated into English, including the unpublished 1989 *samizdat* essay “The Spiritual Renewal of the Nation: The way out of the crisis” and “Catholicism and Politics – Roots and perspectives of today’s situation” published outside Czechoslovakia in 1980 (in Czech). These essays are essential for an appreciation of Benda’s legacy as a thinker, a legacy relevant even after the fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern European countries. In introducing these lesser-known texts, my hope is that they may take their place in the ongoing discussion on anti-politics and dissident political thought.

The role of intellectuals or the intelligentsia in the Czech Republic is paradigmatic of the entire Central and Eastern European region; it is predominantly a public intervention into political matters. In order to understand the specificity of their situation, one needs to consider the historical heritage of the intelligentsia in the region. The historian Bradley

Abrams argues that culture and politics overlap in Czechoslovakia to the point where they are largely interchangeable. “In the life of the Czech nation, as in others of the region, the borders between political and cultural activity have often been so blurred as to make distinguishing them artificial and even arbitrary”(Abrams, 39). These two realms the politics and culture, often separated in American political life, are not, historically speaking, mutually exclusive in the Central European context.

For this reason, public intellectuals have long played a particularly essential role as the critical voice of Czech society. In fact, their role is not only to be commentators on public affairs, but to take part as more creative, active participants in the life of political polis. Though there is no simple answer to Tismaneanu’s question: “Do intellectuals still matter in post-communist societies?”(Tismaneanu, 158), I agree with Jeffrey Isaac’s point that: “The former dissidents are not anachronisms, not traitors and not prophets. They are individuals [...] who now have become participants in the discourse of democracy”(Isaac, 2004:128). The role Václav Benda assumed after November 1989 entirely characteristic of this view. Benda was an active politician, a member of the Civic party, where he worked to bring his vision of conservatively radical politics into reality. Benda can in some ways be considered the “enfant terrible”, or “misfit” in the eyes of former dissidents because of his uncompromising conservative views that border on bigotry. Though we may not agree with his ideology, this conservatism was an essential element in the refusal to capitulate during the Socialist period, and a better understanding of Benda’s little-known contribution to Czech dissidence can help draw a more complex

portrait of this diverse group of people. This paper serves as an attempt to revisit what has remained in Czech no more than a myth after Benda's death.

Benda, who was a president of the Academic student council of Charles University in Prague in 1968, and graduated in philosophy in 1970, was dismissed from the Department of Philosophy for political reasons. After graduating in mathematics and physics, he worked as a mathematician and a software engineer. (*Křesťané a Charta 77*, biographies: 94) After joining Charter 77 he was imprisoned for four years. During his imprisonment he wrote extensive letters to his wife on religious and philosophical subjects, as well as fairy tales to their children; three volumes of these letters have been published by Palach Press (1980). The letters written during imprisonment by authors such as Benda, Havel, or Milan Šimečka constitute their own literary genre, with certain common characteristics. The author usually does not have any other media on which to focus his or her intellectual energy, which gives them an extraordinary focus, power and value as a testimony to the historical period. As Benda himself points out in one of his letters from prison: "Writing letters for you is my main joy here and also an axis of my intellectual efforts" (Benda, 17). Thus the complexity of letters – Michnik's, Havel's or Benda's— derives from the unfree conditions in which they were written. However, the letters themselves will not be the primary focus of my analysis for reasons of content – instead, I will look at the texts written before and after his imprisonment, texts that deal with his vision of political Catholicism per se.

Let me first point to certain similarities between the writings, content-wise, of these three dissidents (Havel, Michnik, and Benda), all of whom contributed to the development of dissident antipolitics in Eastern Europe. One of the three, Benda, has been largely forgotten. In no case is my intention to put Benda's writings on par with that of Michnik or Havel. Comparison with these two prolific authors who rightly enjoy world-wide fame can instead serve to situate the political thinking of Benda. And, subsequently, my desire is to shed more light on Benda as one of the thinkers crucial to the philosophy behind Charter 77. To do this, I wish to discuss two virtually unknown samizdat texts that are preserved at the University of Texas, Austin. The first of these, the *samizdat* journal he edited, *PARAF -Paralelní Akta Filozofie*, offered a crucial point of focus for the Catholic tradition in Benda's political thought. Another essay, "Katolicismus a politika" appeared in *Křesťané a Charta 77*, a collection of texts published in 1980. Both these texts have never been translated.

### **The Decade of spiritual renewal – re-culturation, social project, parallel polis?**

In 1989, Benda wrote:

"More than a re-evangelization of our lands, I think it is better to speak of their re-Christianization. The necessary condition of a lasting re-Christianization is in turn a *re-culturation*, understood in its widest sense. Such re-culturation is not feasible without the renewal of the polis and society, without a rehabilitation of the civic [*politický?*] life in its fullest sense. (Benda, 1989:8)

The Czech Republic is by some accounts the most atheistic country in the world. And yet, we should not let this fact cause us to overlook the important, though admittedly

marginal role of Catholicism in recent Czech political history. The contribution of Catholicism both as an institution and as a value system in the transition of Czechoslovakia to democracy remains neglected both in the West and even by Czech historians of modern history. Catholic intellectuals, with the assistance of the Church, launched in 1989 a major social project, what Benda called, in his essay “Katolicismus a politika – koreny a perspektivy dnesni situace” (English title?) from 1989, a process of *re-culturation*. This ambitious account of the Catholic tradition in the Czech lands –what Benda called *The Decade of the spiritual renewal of the nation*—has frequently been referred to in Czech religious circles as *The Decade*. This movement played an important role in supporting the transition towards a liberal society. Benda himself was among the intellectuals who helped to launch *The Decade*. Benda’s role in the preparation or organization of *The Decade* lay in the critical accounts that he published on the topic in the samizdat literature, and through his writing, the project was more widely discussed in the public sphere.

In the text “Parallel polis” from 1978, the only essay of Benda’s known to a wider audience, he elaborated options to develop the activities of Charter 77 along the lines of so-called “parallel social structures,” including those of culture, education, the economy, etc. He proposed a new public sphere for discussion and critique, addressing the degeneration of the public sphere in the East that Habermas has described:

The tight connection between an autonomous civil society and an integral private sphere stands out even more clearly when contrasted with totalitarian societies of bureaucratic socialism. Here a panoptic state not only directly controls the

bureaucratically desiccated public sphere. Administrative intrusions and constant supervision corrode the communicative structure of everyday contacts in families and schools, neighborhoods and municipalities. The destruction of solidary living conditions and the paralysis of initiative and independent engagement in overregulated yet legally uncertain sectors go hand in hand with the crushing of social groups, associations, and networks; with indoctrination and the dissolution of cultural identities; with the suffocation of spontaneous public communication. (Habermas1998: 369)

The concept of the parallel polis was designed to counter this withering away of the public sphere during the post-1968 period referred to as “Normalization.” During this period, the Czechoslovak government made a sort of Faustian pact with the population: we’ll give you a minimal level of consumer comfort (a car, summer house), and all we ask is that you leave the politics to us. In contrast to the pre-1968 period of active manipulation of people’s daily lives in the attempt to create the famous “New Socialist Man,” under Normalization, people were encouraged to withdraw from public life, above all avoiding all political matters, which were left in the hands of a bureaucratic elite. The parallel polis was a call for a mass-based refusal of this compromise, a call not to take over politics, but to create autonomous centers of action and reflection that would strengthen the public sphere. The Charter 77 movement of which Benda was a part encompassed a very “broad range of political views and civil mentalities,” and according to Benda himself, and Benda felt that the movement paid for this heterogeneity to a certain extent through its “schizophrenic situation.” “The mood common among the Charter signatories,” he wrote in 1980, “was a shift from an ecstatic feeling of liberation

caused by the signature to a gradual disillusionment and deep skepticism” (Benda, 1980:69).

Benda claims in the essay (TITLE?) that “Charter managed to overcome [this schizophrenia] by stressing the ethical aspects [of its project] and preferring a moral stance to a political one”(69). As a result of the death of the philosopher Jan Patočka, who was the “spiritus movens” of this strategy, the state power eventually adopted the weapons of the opposition by changing a political problem into a moral one, but could only articulate the moral stance abstractly, without a positive vision and direction (GIVE EXAMPLE?). “An abstract moral stance is a mere gesture, one that can be maximally effective, but its effectiveness is limited to weeks or months” (69). In his celebrated essay, Benda offers a commentary on his strategy based on the moral obligation and mission of the movement as a “unifying moment and a source of dynamism.” Benda’s solution is in the construction of a parallel polis, which would give a certain positive perspective and dynamism to the sphere of public action.

### **Benda’s contribution to the dissent movement and its theory**

Benda’s political thought is far reaching. His philosophy has the potential to offer a valid contribution to political philosophy both within and outside the dissident movement.

With the concept of a parallel polis, Benda envisioned a non-governmental sphere that evolved a different, non-totalitarian political system. These social structures parallel to the governmental bureaucracy are for Benda crucially connected with the potential of the Catholic Church. Unlike other more atheistic dissidents, he defends Czech Catholicism,



which differs from the Slovak or Polish experience, attributing to it a mass base and non-problematic connection with the national tradition, an uninterrupted historical continuity and a primarily conservative nature. Unlike the Czech experience, political Catholicism in Slovakia had been tied with fascist Slovak state, which, Benda comments, “still presents a political whip and trauma” (Benda, 1980:266). Benda, like many conservative Catholic intellectuals, was a critic of Western modernity. The polis in both traditional democracies of the West and in countries of the Eastern Bloc, he writes, could not be described as “healthy.” Benda saw the need for reform of the polis in totalitarian and democratic countries as the only similarity between them. Fundamentally, he imagined the difference in the systems of East and West through an analogy with sick organs and cancerous cells. Benda argues that in the West, the polis is built up from sick cells, while in the totalitarian order the cells are malignant, and therefore threaten to take over the whole organism (Benda, 1980: 267). In his distrust of the Western left as incapable of understanding this profound difference, Benda believed that “the nations of the Eastern Bloc are entitled to formulate a radically new political order, to offer a solution to a worldwide political crisis” (Benda, 1980:267). His hope for the potential of the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe was supported by the election of a “theologian of a new evangelic character”, the Krakow archbishop Karol Wojtyla, as a pope.

### **Spiritual values in the formation of Benda’s philosophy:**

#### **Benda’s conservative radicalism**

Unlike his more liberal former colleagues from the dissident movement, public discussion of Václav Benda in the Czech Republic stems primarily from his development from Charter 77 dissident to conservative radical politician after the 1989 revolution. As

his letters written in prison and his essays written in the 1980s indicate, Benda's religious beliefs are extremely pronounced and conservative, at times nearly bigoted. It is this self-righteous moralizing attitude that offers both the most radical and problematic point of his thinking. Some of his chauvinist accounts concern his disagreement with abortion as a human right, for example (Benda, 1989: 14). As controversial as such views may be in the post-1989 context, I think it is still important to consider the degree to which this uncompromising moral stance allowed Benda to develop his uniquely influential dissident views in Charter 77. For example and most interestingly, he departed from the defense of tolerance typical of other dissidents; though we may criticize this intolerance in an era of global terrorism, in 1978, such a stance, similar in this way to that of Wojtyła, stood as a uniquely powerful and inspiring refusal of any compromise with the Communist regime. We could perhaps trace this uncompromising strand of religious dissidence as far back in the Czech nation as Jan Hus.

Benda's view of Czech history was, as I outlined earlier, interpreted through his Catholic lens. This effected his interpretation of the beginnings of the Czechoslovak republic in 1918, for example. He claimed that the anti-Catholic tradition of Tomas Masaryk was only an official state position, and that the Czech masses were in fact Catholic. Benda goes even further by saying that the "official idea of Czech statehood originated in the reformation tradition, a tradition that was historical nonsense, as well as a punishment for the spiritual, cultural and political sterility of the contemporary Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia" (Benda, 1980:267-8). Historically, Slovak Catholicism remained political and nationalist – but "at the price of denying Czechoslovak statehood and a

democratic tradition” (Benda, 1980:268). Here, Benda is referring to the establishment of the Slovak fascist state during the WWII led by the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso.

According to Benda, in Bohemia and Moravia in the first Republic (1921-1939), Catholic politics played no important role in the overall social climate. The only exceptions were the Catholic-oriented literary circles, which the Catholic Church refused to acknowledge. “In 1948, the Catholic Church represented the only organized opposition to the Communist party, yet it was without political experience. The Communist regime thus began a systematic repression of the organizational and intellectual potential of the Church” (Benda, 1980: 268). Benda argues that this repression could not, however, erase the church’s role in the moral culture of the nation. The fact that between 1948 and 1968 the Catholic Church limited its discourse to minimal ritual manifestations is, in Benda’s opinion, “more than counterbalanced by the high moral credit that the Church gained in the eyes of the society” (Benda, 1980:269).

### **Christians and Charter 77 – the potential for an alternative public sphere**

Benda placed his hope in the potential for the political renewal of the nation in the strength of the Catholic cultural tradition in the Czech lands. This faith was, I think, a little far-fetched, especially when Benda himself was aware of the ambiguity of the Czechs historical experience of with the Catholic Church. The Celtic tribe of the Bohemians, together with the pagan Slav Father Czech came to settle in the region, contributing to the foundation myth of the Czech nation. The Slavs Constantin and Method from Thesalloniki brought Christianity to the Moravian region and used Cyrillic

to evangelize the population no earlier than the ninth century. Here, the historical argument speaks against Benda's assertion of Catholic roots of the Czech state.

Moreover, the Czech public has, as I mentioned before, historically inclined to atheism.

Parallel to the national myth, the Church developed its own national myth (supported by many figures of saints from Czech history) in an attempt to incorporate its basic values into the national consciousness. Similarly, Benda tried to point to the positive Catholic values in a population that was in fact predominantly non-religious. The strength of his point, however, is in calling attention to those general values that are understood to be good (dignity, tolerance, what could be summed up as "not living in a lie"), values that every individual understands. I would call these catholic (small "c") in the sense of general or universal values. The problem is when Benda attributes these values to the Catholic *Church* as a Czech institution.

Catholicism is institutionalized in the West and dominates society, but in contexts such as State Socialism or the military dictatorships in Latin America, where it is marginalized or even persecuted, it can play a critical role in society. It is not clear, in Benda's philosophical language, to what extent he uses the term "Catholic" in a religious, institutional sense or "catholic" in the sense of "universal" or "all-embracing", in terms of the values of all humanity. For the most part, it seems, he believes in the potential of the Church as an institution and its role in the political life of a society. However, in many places he lists a set of basic human values, values that appeal generally to every human being and that he identifies as "catholic." Both these meanings of the word (Catholic

and/or catholic) have political implications and can serve to describe political concepts.

In a totalitarian system, Benda writes,

any search for truth, each struggle for one's soul, becomes an act that is explicitly political, an act that is creatively political. Paradoxically, in a society that is characterized by mass flight into privacy and total indifference toward the official pseudo-politics, we can speak about a latent politization, about an increase of political potential – and Christians could and should become one of the media, through which this potential is realized and objectifies itself in a visible shape.

(Benda, 1980:272)

The weak part of Benda's argument is to evoke the Catholicism of the predominantly atheist Czech population. In contrast to Benda's interpretation of historical experience, one could say more accurately that the Catholic Church was imposed on the Czech nation by the Habsburg monarchy for over three hundred years. It is no surprise that major historians such as Alois Jirasek refer to the catholic period as the "Dark Times" in his anthology of the history of Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>3</sup> During the years of the counter-reformation, hundreds of non-religious, culturally Protestant intellectuals such as Johann Amos Comenius fled the country.

Benda does criticize the practices of the Catholic Church towards the population. What he is referring to, then, is not the institution of the Church itself, although the inauguration of Karol Wojtyla as Pope was a crucial impetus to the development of antipolitics in Poland and Czechoslovakia. He is aware of the contradiction of the term

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<sup>3</sup> see Jirasek on the Czech history during re-Catholization

“political Catholicism” in his historical reminiscences, but hoped for its positive meaning to dominate within his vision of new politics, one that is far from the party-based struggle for power, but rather a “commitment of playful and sacred care to the matters of the polis” (Benda, 1980:277).

Whichever political orientation a Catholic inclines to, he is always able to maintain a certain distance from it and value other orientations’ acquisitions as vital and fundamental. A Catholic is “more sinful” or more benevolent to a sinner than a Protestant is, and he understands better its positive meaning in the history of salvation (see *felix culpa*). (Benda, 1980:276)

From this observation, Benda argues for the increased tolerance of a distinctly Catholic perspective. At the same time, this outlook maintains a healthy skepticism toward liberalism and socialism respectively, along with a belief in a possible radical reformation of both individual and society. Such enlightened visions of the Catholic position are immediately followed by Benda’s account of the radicalism of the Catholic vision in a call for co-responsibility and the assumption of collective guilt as a result for the past. This call, according to Benda, can be “more radical than of the most prudish puritan”(Benda, 1980:276) and is formulated in the dogmas of the cult of the Saints and their individual “moral” examples.

These characteristics are typical, Benda maintains in this 1980 text, of the “awakening (or re-awakening) political consciousness of Catholic citizenry”, a political consciousness which had been enriched by historical experience and left a legacy of “understanding and distance” (Benda, 1980:277). What this position can evolve to, he argues, is the embrace

of the most radical of the particular approaches or concepts, with the assertion of being “not radical enough, because only particular” NOT CLEAR. Such an attitude is, in Benda’s view, Catholic in the correct sense of the word. (Benda, 1980:277-8).

The new politics should be serious, but non-violent, “necessarily playful”. It should be a politics that requires commitment (on a personal level, of which Benda is an example himself, although he never wanted to be engaged as a public intellectual). Regarding the new politics, Benda ascribed moral values to societal organization, but reserved the creation of Utopia to a realm beyond: “A state or any other type of organization of society can be a possible factor in limiting evil, never a tool of creating a paradise on Earth” (Benda, 1980:279). This specific point I see as problematic EXPLAIN HOW. On the other hand, he envisioned his new politics as a very secular enterprise, in which “human rights and rules of parliamentary democracy, but also privileges and freedoms of ‘feudal’ world and demands of social justice are something self-evident – because in some way or the other realized, but at the same time something *incomplete*”(Benda, 1980:279). [emphasis mine]

With this concluding statement of his essay, Benda evokes a set of universal values, the understanding and explication of which he unfortunately assigns to a certain group of individuals (the Catholics). On the other hand, Václav Benda might have envisioned every human being as catholic, and thus able to embrace universal values of human dignity. This unrealized potential of his thought, I would argue, is what we can take as his still relevant contribution as a public intellectual and one of the founding members of the

dissent movement in Czechoslovakia. His perspective deserves a place as a valid, inspiring and, in the universal sense of the word - catholic vision of new politics.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the controversial aspects of his philosophy, including its tendency to intolerance and even moral bigotry, what then is the positive contribution of Benda's thought?

Hidden under the mask of the Catholic vision, he resurrected universal ("catholic") values, that he imagined every human being could actively recognize and take to form the central spine of political life, around which a "playful", yet responsible care of the polis would turn.

Apart from drawing attention to the under-appreciated Catholic contribution to the Czechoslovak dissident movement, as a Catholic intellectual, Václav Benda's also thought demonstrates the extraordinary heterogeneity of Charter 77. Unlike the Polish movement of Solidarity, which achieved only a limited degree of heterogeneity (it was based around the worker's movement and remained predominantly Catholic) the Charter movement embraced a vast array of people who opposed the regime from profoundly different backgrounds and perspectives – not only across the political spectrum, but also across social divisions (priests, scientists, writers, actors, workers, Catholics, Protestants, atheists...). In this sense, Vaclav Benda stands as an example of Havel's vision of dissidence as a mixture of the singular and the universal:



Historical experience teaches us that any genuinely meaningful point of departure in an individual's life usually has an element of universality about it. In other words, it is not something partial, accessible only to a restricted community, and not transferable to any other. On the contrary, it must be potentially accessible to everyone; it must foreshadow a general solution and, thus, it is not just the expression of an introverted, self-contained responsibility that individuals have to and for themselves alone, but responsibility to and for the world. (194)

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