The Parallel Society vs Totalitarianism | How to Create a Free World

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The following is a transcript of this video.

> *"The real question is whether the 'brighter future' is always so distant. What if it has been here for a long time already — and only our own blindness and weakness have prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it."*
>
> *Vaclav Havel, The Power of the Powerless*

Across the globe a confluence of factors is destabilizing the fabric of society. Many government institutions are corrupt to the core. Many politicians are so detached from reality that they view those who want freedom as enemies. The mainstream media has morphed into the propaganda arm of the government whose primary goal is to augment state power. To make matters worse, global economies have been ravaged by destructive government policies and while rampant money printing has created a mirage of economic stability, this mirage is quickly giving way to an ugly reality.

Politicians tell us that if we are unhappy with the way we are ruled then we can express our displeasure at the polls, or

even run for office. But this is to assume that the democratic ideal is the best way to return freedom to an unfree world. This is to overlook the corrupting influence of state power. This to forget that the massive bureaucratic class that operates many of the levers of government is not replaced through elections. And finally, this is to assume that state power is the solution to what ails society. Perhaps state power is the poison that is destroying it.

A more practical solution to what ails the modern world may be to allow the dead weight of the state to collapse in on itself, as it inevitably will, and to soften the blow of this collapse through the creation of a parallel society. In this video we are going to explore what a parallel society is, how it played a pivotal role in the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, and how the creation of a parallel society may be our best chance of returning freedom to an insane authoritarian world.

> *"If it proves impossible legally to compel the ruling power to change the ways it governs us, and if for various reasons those who reject this power cannot or do not wish to overthrow it by force, then the creation of an independent or alternative or parallel [society] is the only dignified solution…"*
>
> *Ivan Jirous, Parallel Polis: An Inquiry*

The basis for the parallel society was born in the mind of Ivan Jirous, a Czech poet and the artistic director of the rock band the Plastic People of the Universe. After members of this band were arrested in 19** for refusing to toe the government line, Jirous called on the community of Czech artists to create music labels, publishing houses, concert halls, art expositions, and other such infrastructure, that existed independently of mainstream society and outside the grasp of the communist State. Jirous hypothesized that if

enough infrastructure were created an "independent society" would spontaneously form and function as a pocket of creative freedom in a highly oppressed society. Jirous defined the independent society as "a [society] not dependent on official channels of communications, or on the hierarchy of values of the establishment" and as he further explained.

> *"…the "independent society" does not compete for power. Its aim is not to replace the powers that be with power of another kind, but rather under this power – or beside it – to create structures that respect other laws and in which the voice of the ruling power is heard only as an insignificant echo from a world that is organized in an entirely different way."*
>
> *Ivan Jirous, Parallel Polis: An Inquiry*

Jirous' idea caught the attention of the Czech Catholic philosopher and mathematician Vaclav Benda. Benda saw in this idea the seeds of a non-violent solution to the destructiveness of Communism. However, for the independent society to have real-world social and political impact it needed to be extended beyond the realm of music and the arts. For the stifling bureaucracy and heavy-hand of the Communist government was suffocating all areas of life. And so Benda coined the phrase "parallel society" to refer to all social, cultural, and economic structures that existed unconstrained by the State. He called such structures "parallel structures", and at the height of political oppression in the early 1970s, Benda urged Czech citizens to begin creating "parallel forms of education and science and scholarship", "parallel political structures", a "parallel information network", and free parallel markets that form a "parallel economy". And as H Gordon Skilling explains:

> *"Outlining the parallel structures which had come into existence or might do so in the future, Benda argued*

that…these might gradually supplant or at least humanise the existing official structures."

H. Gordon Skilling, Civic Freedom in Central Europe

The rationale behind the creation of parallel structures and the parallel society was simple: as the Communist government had a monopoly on force and was too powerful to challenge head on, it was best to turn away from it and defy it by ignoring it as much as possible. Rather than trying to eliminate oppressive State structures, it was better to build up better ones that could function as alternatives or replacements to the establishment system that was in the process of dying. A well-known Communist dissident, Jacek Kuron, captured this rationale in 1980 when he responded to the torching of a communist headquarters by stating: "stop burning down committees, let us build our own." Or as Ivan Jirous explained:

"[The parallel society] began in spontaneous acts of mutual self-defense in different parts of society. Those who take part are active people who can no longer stand to look passively at the general decay…rigidity, bureaucracy, and suffocation of every living idea or sign of movement in the official sphere. And because these people sooner or later recognized that efforts to bring about the slightest improvements in the official sphere were exercises in futility, it was only a matter of time before they said: Why not invest our talents, abilities, goodwill, and enthusiasm into something that no one will be able to corrupt, that we will be able to decide about ourselves in the end."

Ivan Jirous, Parallel Polis: An Inquiry

The parallel society provided individuals the means to express themselves freely without fear of censorship and to fulfill their goals and aims without dealing with the suffocating

bureaucracy of the state. Furthermore, individuals felt that by turning towards parallel structures and away from the structures that functioned as vehicles of the State, they were influencing society for the better. The parallel society thus served as a much-needed source of hope in a society which had succumbed to apathy due to decades of Communist rule. And in the latter half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, this hope inspired countless people throughout Eastern Europe and the parallel society infiltrated many areas of culture and the economy.

> *"…even my most audacious expectations have been considerably surpassed…It is no longer necessary to show that the parallel society is possible."*
>
> *Vaclav Benda, Parallel Polis: An Inquiry*

By the late 1980s, the parallel society in Eastern Europe had become so strong, decentralized, and decoupled from the State, that the Communist authorities lost their grip on power:

> *"The revolution which swept through…Eastern Europe in the closing months of 1989 was a spontaneous product of the massive discontent and the yearning for freedom of the peoples of those countries. It was also a culmination of the independent activities of many citizens as they sought to defend their rights against the party-state system and to create a parallel or independent society as a challenge and an alternative to it."*
>
> *H. Gordon Skilling, Civic Freedom in Central Europe*

One of the more famous examples of a parallel structure was the underground film industry in Romania. The Communist dictator Nicholae Ceausescu outlawed the possession and distribution of Western films, however, the entrepreneur Teodor Zamfir created a vast underground market smuggling

Western films into the country and then translating and dubbing them into Romanian. The demand for the films rapidly grew and as the Romanian people were exposed to Western culture their eyes were opened to the full extent of their own oppression. As one Romanian dissident put it: "The seeds of freedom that were planted by the video films, grew." Zamfir made a fortune off the parallel market he created and he became one of the most powerful men in Romania. And in an interview for a 2015 documentary Zamfir explained:

> *"During the 1989 revolution everybody was in the streets because they all knew there was a better life out there. How? From films."*
>
> *Teodor Zamfir, Chuck Norris vs. Communism*

Given advances in technology and the capacity to spread information, goods, and services across the world, the potential to create a wide variety of parallel structures on both a local and global level is significantly greater today than it was in Communist Eastern Europe. And so rather than passively waiting for a political saviour to bring us freedom and save us from societal collapse, a more realistic strategy is to actively participate in the construction of a parallel society.

> *"…[we must create] all kinds of independent parallel structures – that is, structures unmanipulated by totalitarian power…"*
>
> *Martin Palous*

Contributing to the creation of a parallel society could amount to, among many possibilities, consuming independent media instead of legacy media, using alternative mediums of exchange rather than government-backed fiat currencies, using social media platforms and decentralized digital

infrastructures that promote freedom of expression, or supporting local businesses rather than global corporations that further the agenda of the political establishment. It could amount to creating self-sustainable communities, conducting scientific inquiry or scholarship free of institutional pressures, or consuming and creating educational resources, art, music, or literature that pays no heed to the establishment status quo. Any action or enterprise that expands the realm of freedom while creatively circumventing censorship and top-down authoritarian or totalitarian control is a boon to the parallel society. For as Egon Bundy, one of the leading figures of the Czech underground, explained:

> *"When the activity of those who oppose the establishment becomes articulated it will be in forms, methods and ideas that are totally unknown, incomprehensible and unacceptable to members of the establishment – and that is how it should be."*
>
> *Egon Bundy, Civic Freedom in Central Europe*

Once a parallel society is sufficiently established, a society is no longer under the same grave danger as when it relies solely on the structures and institutions that are appendages of the tyrannical State. For if these establishment structures collapse, parallel structures will soften the blow of an economic or social breakdown. Furthermore, parallel structures cater to the authentic needs and wants of the people rather than the political class, and so they tend to be more life promoting than the establishment structures. As parallel structures develop and solidify more and more people will instinctively turn towards them and as the parallel society expands so too does the sphere of cultural, economic, and political freedom.

> *"…a genuine [parallel society] would, by a process of metastasis, penetrate all the important social structures."*

Milan Šimečka, Parallel Polis: An Inquiry

And as Vaclav Havel further explains:

"The ultimate phase of this process is the situation in which the official structures…simply begin withering away and dying off, to be replaced by new structures that have evolved from 'below' and are put together in a fundamentally different way."

Vaclav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

In 1988, a year before Communism in Eastern Europe collapsed, Ivan Jirous reflected on the growth of the parallel society and on the dramatic social changes that were following in the wake.

"[The parallel society] has proven its worth, and it is the only meaningful structure that people can create if they do not wish to remain mere appendices of the political and social structures created by the ruling power."

Ivan Jirous, Parallel Polis: An Inquiry

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