

# Alternative Editorial: Alastair McIntosh on the parallel polis as a "theatre of the spirit"

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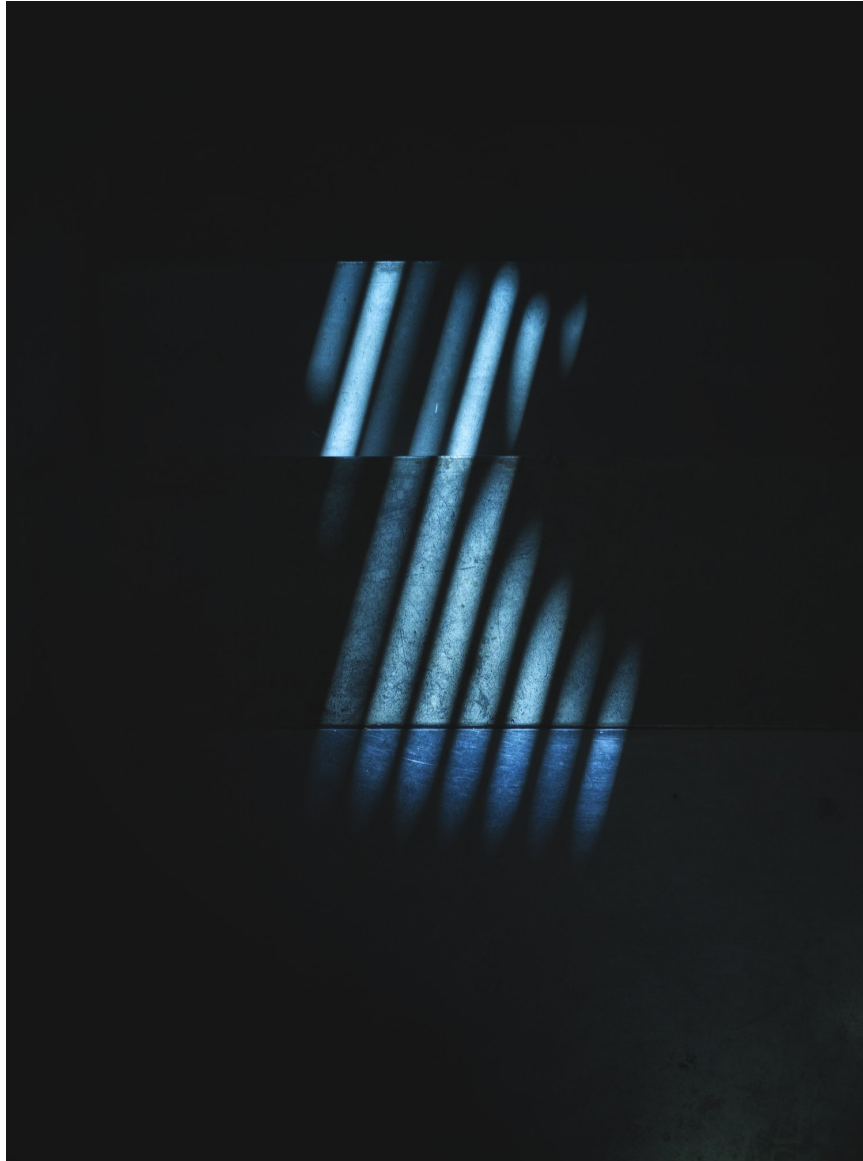


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We continue our August series of weekly guest Alternative Editorials (daily blogging taking a well-earned rest!).

Last week [Pat Kane argued](#) for a more militant imagination; this week, we are delighted to run a short, original essay from the theologian and activist [Alastair McIntosh](#).

Alastair was so inspired by Alternative Global's founder Indra Adnan's recent use of the Czech dissident term "[parallel polis](#)" (at the [Realisation Festival](#)) that he took himself on a journey into its key texts, written by Vaclav Havel and Vaclav Benda. The brilliant result is below. Our thanks to Alastair.

## The parallel polis as a "theatre of the spirit"

Alastair McIntosh

As Russia invaded Ukraine and on the day that Putin rattled the nuclear sabre, I heard from a former student who was working in Kiev. The only way, he said in a couple of since-deleted tweets, was to get out there and kill as many Russians as possible.

The logic is impeccable. For a quarter of a century, I've guest lectured at military staff colleges across Europe, and I never question the logic of force. It adds up all the way through to mutually assured destruction. As Gandhi put it, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind".

But most of the military are not thugs. They, too, see peace as their profession. In my talks my remit is [to put the case for nonviolence](#). I suggest that force is not the only way to counter force. If we hope to break the spiral of violence and not just defer war with a Roman peace, we need to consider whether there is another way.

I am a Quaker, and in our [Peace Testimony](#), we try "to live in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars." We speak of "patterns and examples", a pattern being a template for a theory of change, while an example is its living demonstration. My response to such as my friend in Kiev is that I have no right to tell another person to renounce fighting fire with fire in self-defence. But it's possible there may be another way.

Many studies in recent years have shown the effectiveness of principled nonviolence. [Chenoweth and Stephan](#) find "that between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts" (p. 7).

But to understand why, we must press deeper than statistical and utilitarian accounts. We must go into the pre-political ethical and even spiritual dynamics that so often lie at the heart of deep peace making. For example, the American theologian Walter Wink provides both a spiritual [analysis of power](#) and an [anthology](#) of multiple case studies from war, civil rights, social justice and other protest.

## Prague Spring to Velvet Revolution

It is why, as we watch events unfold in Ukraine, I cannot help but make comparisons with Czechoslovakia - from the Prague Spring of the late 1960s, up to the Velvet Revolution (*Sametová Revoluce*) as the Czechs call it, or the Gentle Revolution (*Nežná Revolúcia*) as the Slovaks call it that followed in 1989.

During 1967 the Union of Czechoslovakian Writers laid ground that found fruition as the liberalisation of the Prague Spring, commencing in January the following year. This was crushed when the Soviet Union with Warsaw Pact allies invaded in August, initially with a quarter of a million troops, thousands of tanks and hundreds of aircraft. However, the Czechoslovakian authorities under Alexander Dubček ordered their forces to remain in barracks.

[The resistance](#) was almost entirely nonviolent. There was an organised mass cacophony of car horns, sirens and church bells, human blockades, graffiti, the *samizdat* makeshift press and clandestine broadcasting. This was to make the invading soldiers aware that theirs was not considered locally as a liberating mission.

The outcome was that very few lives were lost on either side. The infrastructure of Czechoslovakia remained intact, and fertile ground had been laid for the 1989 revolution to be similarly nonviolent. It cost just over twenty years, a generation, of waiting for this outcome. Who knows whether, in subtle ways, such nonviolence influenced what then emerged in the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's [perestroika and glasnost](#) reforms?

Ultimately, nonviolence can be the choice to die rather than to kill. It disrupts the aggressor's logic of violence. It loosens what Adam Curle, the first professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University and Quaker mediator at the end of the Biafra-Nigeria war called "the clenched fist around the human heart". In Christian terms, going the full "way of the cross", or the equivalent in Buddhist terms, is too far for the great majority of people. Yet, nonviolence is a way of being and doing that understands the power of moral high ground. It is not something that can be flicked on and off, as soon as the shooting starts or stops. It is a way of life and of relationship to others. Understanding why it has such a relatively successful track record is an imperative of our dangerous times.

## Joy and *Parallel Polis* under Occupation

The Czechs and Slovaks did not just nod off to sleep soon after being invaded. “Resistance is the secret of joy,” writes [Alice Walker](#) in another context. In the case of Czechoslovakia, that found expression as the *parallel polis* of the Charter 77 dissident thinker Václav Benda, working in close association with the country’s future president, Václav Havel and others like minded.

Benda, [writing in 1988](#), has explained that he specifically chose the phrase *parallel polis* over other such “the underground” or “alternative culture”. This wasn’t something like “a cluster of flowers that has grown in a place accidentally sheltered from the killing winds of totalitarianism and easily destroyed when those winds change direction.” Even the term “dissident” sat uncomfortably with the Charter 77 human rights signatories, for that which gives life is not “dissident”.

Instead, the term *polis* recognises a society or state characterised by a sense of community. So it was, wrote Benda, that the unequivocal priority after the crushing of the Prague Spring became “the preservation or the renewal of the national community in the widest sense of the word – along with the defence of all the values, institutions, and material conditions to which the existence of such a community is bound.”

Such a communitarian *polis* is *parallel*, because it recognises the inevitable reality of interdependence with the oppressor state. People still have to use the state’s health service, schools, housing, currency, etc.. They have to do so even while developing - successfully, as he points out proved to be the case – a “parallel economics” and a “parallel foreign policy”. Wryly, he notes that “most of my critics considered these were arbitrary hypotheses”, but they were worked up into becoming realities in a way “that neither we nor the Poles even dared to dream about ten years ago.”

Parallel lines, Benda points out, meet only at infinity in mathematical theory, but in practice the term “does not rule out the possibility that parallel courses may sometimes converge or cross each other.” The concept of a *parallel polis* “stresses variety, but not absolute independence”, he continues, “for a parallel course can be maintained only with a certain mutual respect and consideration.”

The significance of this notion for Scotland and Wales, probably Northern Ireland, and even an England seeking to re-find its spiritual

footing may not escape the reader. Benda held to Catholic social values which he softly expressed as a lived liberation theology during his short life (1946-1999). This shaped the depth of his view that the Iron Curtain divided people at “various spheres of consciousness within each individual.” It was, so to speak, an inner as well as an outer colonisation, of the soul and of society. Correspondingly, the strength of the *parallel polis* was that it ran through both outer social structures and inner psychological ones. He summarised:

To return to truth and justice, to a meaningful order of values, to value once more the inalienability of human dignity and the necessity for a sense of human community in mutual love and responsibility – these, in my opinion, are the present goals of the *parallel polis*.

### **Reclaiming Authenticity; Recovering Citizenship**

Benda acknowledges, indeed, he makes a virtue of the observation that growing the parallel polis is “small-scale work”. Another contributor to the [same paper](#), Jiří Dienstbier, who had been a journalist forced by the regime to work as a janitor and later became the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia, spells out the kind of elements that give rise to radical and ultimately, revolutionary emergent properties within the *polis*.

The meaning of independent activities lies in their authenticity and, in the conditions in which we live, in the continual renewal of the meaning of authenticity. People know that resigning themselves to their own private interests and sitting in front of the television is not the only alternative. More and more people are trying to live authentic lives, even though many do not do so in the open. There is not as much apathy in Czechoslovakia as there often seems to be....

When a citizen proclaims that he will not allow his citizenship to be taken from him, he renews the very notion of citizenship itself. The writer who writes a book and publishes it in *samizdat* or with a foreign publishing house proves that he is still a writer ... likewise, the typist who types the book and the person who binds it are renewing their citizenship as well.

Note the stress on overcoming apathy by recovering authenticity, a sense of soul. But it's not just a matter of “heart”, of feeling. It's the

rationality of “head” and application of “hand” too. He goes on to quote Adam Michnik: “For a lynching, all you need is an angry mob; for dialogue, you need an organised society.”

I am reminded of some Peace Camp graffiti at the Faslane nuclear submarine base some years ago: “The meek shall inherit the Earth, and the meek are getting ready.” Also, “Any fool can live in conflict: it takes guts to live in peace.” I am also reminded that the Greek term *praus*—which in the beatitudes of Christ is often weakly translated as “meek”—can better be read as “the gentle strong”. Such is the quality that Václav Havel, the playwright who became the liberated Czechoslovakia’s first president, described in his highly influential long essay about the *parallel polis*, [“The Power of the Powerless”](#).

### **The Pre-political in the Theatre of the Spirit**

Havel argued that to call the Soviet-installed regime “a dictatorship” was to miss its subtlety. Rather, like with Walter Wink’s theology of power as a being ultimately spiritually grounded, it was a “metaphysical order”. Metaphysics is concerned with the interiority, the innermost nature, of outward realities. Thus, as Havel puts it in his essay:

The whole power structure ... could not exist at all if there were not a certain metaphysical order binding all its components together.... This metaphysical order guarantees the inner coherence of the totalitarian power structure. It is the glue holding it together, its binding principle, the instrument of its discipline. Without this glue, the structure as totalitarian structure would vanish; it would disintegrate into individual atoms ... [it] would collapse in upon itself, as it were, in a kind of implosion.

Like Benda, Havel has no hesitation in using spiritual language and subtly expressed or coded theological insights. Movements like Charter 77 “for the most part originate”, he writes, “in the far broader area of the ‘pre-political,’ where living within a lie confronts living within the truth, that is, where the demands of the post-totalitarian system conflict with the real aims of life [including] certain intellectual and spiritual interests.”

Havel called this pre-political groundswell in the cultural psyche “the theatre of the spirit.” Whereas historical and political analysts tend to see the surface clash of two groups on the level of real power – the



establishment and the reformers, “what is frequently forgotten is that this encounter was merely the final act and the inevitable consequence of a long drama, originally played out chiefly in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society.”

This pre-political work – the kind of actions Benda described in his example of the many hands that it takes to publish a book – is the realm of philosophers, intellectuals, artists and musicians (he names *The Plastic People of the Universe*, a rock group who were put on trial) as well as volunteers, activists and all who contribute what they can to create a parallel *polis* of authenticity, self-authored or self-determined.

He notes that conventional observers “overestimate the importance of direct political work in the traditional sense [and] fail to appreciate the political significance of those ‘pre-political’ events and processes that provide the living humus from which genuine political change usually springs.” The metaphor here reminds that Havel, as a close reader of the signs of the times, supported green political ideas. But what drives pre-political action? What gives it coherence? To Havel, like Gandhi, like Christ, like Isabella Baumfree born a slave of Ghanian provenance, a.k.a. Sojourner Truth – like these and so many more - the answer rests in truth.

### **To Live Within the Truth**

Gandhi derived the term *satyagraha* from two Sanskrit words. *Graha* means force, and *satya* means soul, truth or reality. Satyagraha, which he saw as the engine of nonviolence, is therefore variously translated as “soul force” or “truth force”. In addition, he pointed out that since in Indian thought truth and reality are one, then to be not in the truth means to be not in reality. The same goes with the Greek word in the gospels translated as truth. *Alethia* means both truth and reality revealed. As the Scots vernacular might have it, if we don’t stand in the truth we become “no’ real”.

Havel’s “theatre of the spirit” comes into play wherever we insist on “living in the truth”. If so-called dissidents have any power at all, he says – “if they have not been exterminated long ago like exotic insects” – then it is not “because the government holds this exclusive group and their exclusive ideas in such awe, but because it is perfectly aware of the potential political power of living within the truth rooted in the hidden sphere.” Here resides “the most intrinsic moral

aspect of their activity". The italics here, continuing to quote from *The Power of the Powerless*, are mine.

The point where living within the truth ceases to be a mere negation of living with a lie and becomes articulate 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." This independent life is not separated from the rest of life ("dependent life") by some sharply defined line. *Both types frequently co-exist in the same people. Nevertheless, its most important focus is marked by a relatively high degree of inner emancipation. It sails upon the vast ocean of the manipulated life like little boats, tossed by the waves but always bobbing back as visible messengers of living within the truth, articulating the suppressed aims of life.*

"What is this independent life of society?" he presses on to ask. "In short, it is an area in which living within the truth becomes articulate and materializes in a visible way." In other words, and as an axiom of any genuine liberation theology, truth is the only knife sharp enough to cut through the lie. Such is why, as somebody else once said, "The truth will set you free."

Like for Benda, it follows too for Havel that violent change must be rejected, "simply because it places its faith in violence," although he does allow wriggle room for "when direct violence can only be met by violence and where remaining passive would in effect mean supporting violence."

That granted, "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."

Culture, therefore, "is a sphere in which the parallel structures can be observed in their most highly developed form, because these parallel structures, it may be said, represent the most articulated expressions so far of living within the truth." As one might expect from a playwright, the creative arts of all kinds are therefore central to creating and sustaining freedom. Moreover, and perhaps less comfortably in a more secular Western Europe, Christianity was very much Havel's "point of departure" as he put it. But wherever we might be coming from, the responsibility is ours, he insists, "that we must accept it and



grasp it here, now, in this place in time and space where the Lord has set us down, and that we cannot lie our way out of it by moving somewhere else....”

Havel concludes his essay with a playful play on [Luke 17:21](#), where the Greek *entos* as the location of the community (or “kingdom”) of heaven can be alternatively translated as “around” or “within”. He doesn’t overtly make this connection, most conventional political eyes might miss it, but it’s obvious and powerful in context:

For the real question is whether the brighter future is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?

Where might such reflections leave Ukraine and Russia? That is not for me to say or choose. That is for their people to determine. Like with Adam Curle’s [work in Biafra/Nigeria](#), sometimes an initial conflict is “unmediatable”, as he put it, and the forces for reconciliation have to wait until a deeper opening of the way and invitation arises.

Where, however, might they leave Scotland? I am reminded of hearing the writer and campaigner, Lesley Riddoch, talking of the need to build independence from within ourselves. In effect, perhaps a *parallel polis* if democracy is thwarted? For my part, I recall for all his faults MacDiarmid, and the [little white rose](#), “that smells sharp and sweet – and breaks the heart.”

*Alastair McIntosh is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow. His books include Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power (Aurum), and most recently, Riders on the Storm: Climate Change and the Survival of Being (Birlinn).*

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