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# Dissident writings as political theory on civil society and democracy

MARLIES GLASIUS

**Abstract.** This article offers an analysis of precisely how civil society and its relation to democracy were conceptualised by its East European and South American proponents in their pre-democratic contexts, through an examination of declarations, newspaper articles, *samizdat* essays, diaries, letters from prison, academic articles and prize acceptance speeches written at the time. The analysis of these source materials is organised under three main themes: the first concerns activists' understanding of the nature of the regime, its aims and its relation to society; the second relates to the features of the emergent civil society the writers of these documents desired, observed, and helped to create; and the final section discusses their strategies and aspirations in relation to 'democratisation'. On the basis of an analysis of commonalities in ideas across these two very different regional and ideological contexts, hypotheses are formulated as building blocks for a political theory of civil society under authoritarian rule, which may apply in yet other, contemporary contexts.

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## Introduction

Civil society has re-entered the political lexicon in the early 1990s, precisely because of its apparent capacity, in Eastern Europe and South America, to contribute to 'opening up' and democratising totalitarian and authoritarian states. Yet subsequent attempts in other contexts to apply the same recipe from the outside, namely strengthening civil society through funding, capacity-building and networking in order to foster a transition to democracy, have often proved less successful. Just as political scientists appeared to be giving up on the relation between civil society and democratisation, the recent peaceful uprisings in the Arab world force us to refocus attention on the question: what is civil society under authoritarian rule?

This article will focus on those countries in Eastern Europe and South America where civil society emerged as a *cause célèbre* in the successful transition to

democracy: Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, Argentina, Brazil and Chile.<sup>1</sup> But it will not attempt comparative case studies or make causal inferences of who did what when and where, and to what extent civil society drove the transition. Much energy has already been devoted to this debate in the years after transition.<sup>2</sup> It may not in fact be possible to satisfactorily resolve this question because with hindsight, the transitions are over-determined by numerous factors.

This article has a different intention. It will offer a theoretical analysis of precisely how civil society was conceptualised by its protagonists in their pre-democratic contexts. Their writings from the pre-democratic period have been largely ignored in later narratives which chart a linear progression from brave Western-oriented dissidents to mass mobilisation to liberal democracy. Studying the original documents may provide new clues as to how these activists saw the nature of the regime, how they conceptualised civil society and the sources of its power, and what exactly their democratic aspirations were. The term 'activists' is used here to cover the diversity of actors who opposed the authoritarian regimes under consideration, whilst 'dissidents' is reserved for a subgroup of high-profile intellectuals. Some, such as Václav Havel, explicitly distanced themselves from the latter term. But alternatives such as 'opposition figures' or 'human rights defenders' have similar drawbacks. The term 'civil society', conversely, is used not to denote the actors whose texts are studied, but to refer to this concept itself, which they apparently found useful to revive.

The purpose of the article then is to re-examine what civil society might actually be and how it might function under authoritarian regimes, and to formulate hypotheses about its potential relation to democratisation or non-democratisation in contemporary settings, on the basis of the writings of Eastern European and South American activists who reintroduced the term into political theory and practice. The underlying assumption is that if commonalities are found in the thinking of activists in these very different regional and ideological contexts, they might also have relevance for yet different contemporary contexts such as the Middle East or China. Thus, the article offers up building blocks for a political theory of civil society under authoritarian rule, which others may apply and test in contemporary contexts.

Naturally, it must be acknowledged that this cannot be a 'pure' exercise in time-travel, as the author's selection from and analysis of the material is partially determined by her own 21st century perspective on civil society and democratisation. But this conundrum is really no different from that of any researcher

<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the sources from these regions as 'East European' and 'South American' respectively, even though both of these regions obviously encompass more countries than the six under consideration here.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Ralf Gustav Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: in a letter intended to have been sent to a gentleman in Warsaw* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990); Grzegorz Ekiert, *The State Against Society: Political Crises and Their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1994); Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead (eds), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Alfred Stepan (ed.), *Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

attempting to ‘translate’ and analyse the perspective of others who are not in direct contact with the reading audience. The author is unavoidably present in the text but attempts to let voices from the past speak for themselves as much as possible through liberal use of literal quotes.

## Sources

This article intends to present a reconstruction of socio-political ideas. The intention is not to reconstruct which ideas were ‘most representative’ of civil society in each country, but instead to look at commonalities and differences in a variety of sources. Neither does the article aspire to systematically reconstruct *for whom* and *to whom* these sources speak (although in some cases this is quite clear), or by whom they were read and heard at the time. The following principles guided the search for sources:

1. All the sources are from either before or during democratisation, thus lacking the (questionable) benefit of hindsight, which is the usual point of departure for studies of democratisation processes.
2. All the sources are from people who lived principally inside the country in question – although circumstances dictated that many spent some time in exile as well.
3. The voices of ‘amateurs’, that is, artists, scientists or housewives are privileged over those of professional political scientists. On the one hand, it was usually difficult or impossible for academics who spoke up to become and remain employed as such within the country. On the other hand, the ideas written by non-professionals are most likely to have stayed outside academic consideration, so they may provide fresher views. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the voice of intellectuals is necessarily somewhat dominant because they tend to write most extensively. A follow-up study will explicitly attempt to look at the ideas of nationalist, violent and other ‘not-so-civil’ manifestations of civil society in the same countries.
4. The study limits itself to writing, and explicitly political writing at that. Fiction, documentaries or other forms of expression might well hold equally important clues to the nature of regime and civil society, but they would require a rather different analytical treatment.
5. Finally, but this is a limitation rather than a principle, the study focuses primarily on documents that have been translated into English. A few documents considered key were read in Spanish, but the bulk of the materials used have been published in English. This of course puts a clear limit on the range of possible documents that can be studied. For each of the six countries, there is presumably much more literature in the national language than in translation; moreover there may be certain biases in what has been translated.

Nonetheless, it has turned out to be possible to select a wide variety of sources just from the translated materials. They include collective declarations, newspaper articles, *samizdat* essays, diaries, letters from prison, books written in exile, academic articles and acceptance speeches for prizes.

The remainder of the article has organised the analysis of its source materials into three main themes: the first on activists' understanding of the nature of the regime, its aims and its relation to society; the second on the features of the emergent civil society the writers of these documents desired, observed, and helped to create; and a final section on their strategies and aspirations in relation to 'democratisation'.

### **Understanding the regime and its aims**

#### *The nature of the regime: not the strong man*

Václav Havel and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the two future presidents, express most clearly and in similar terms what the regime they live under is *not*. Havel argues that 'the term "dictatorship", regardless of how intelligible it may otherwise be, tends to obscure rather than clarify the real nature of power in this system.'<sup>3</sup> Whereas classical dictatorships have been temporary, local, ideologically shallow, and built on brute force, the 'post-totalitarian' system of the Eastern bloc is lasting, goes beyond national boundaries, and is built on ideology itself. Cardoso too points out that whilst authoritarianism is not new to the South American continent, the authoritarianism of the 1970s and 1980s is no longer the personality-based *caudillismo* of an earlier era.<sup>4</sup> Its resurgence must instead be understood in a context of modernisation. It is 'bureaucratic', and emphatically based on 'the military institution as an organisation'.<sup>5</sup>

However, and here he seems to make an explicit comparison with Eastern Europe, South American authoritarianism is 'underdeveloped': 'It may kill and torture, but it does not exercise complete control over everyday life.' It has been strong enough in its dealings with so-called subversive groups, 'but it is not as efficient when it comes to controlling the universities, for example, or even bureaucracy itself.'<sup>6</sup> This difference between the relatively young and spectacularly brutal regimes of South America and the more entrenched and subtle workings of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe is of course generally recognised. But speculations by activists as to who exactly is in power, and for whose benefit, can be divided into two groups that do not follow regional lines.

#### *Realists: hunger for power*

The first, typified by both Cardoso and the Hungarian novelist Gyorgy Konrad, could broadly be called 'realist'. They largely maintain that an elite is in power for its own sake. Cardoso, a famous proponent of dependency theory before he

<sup>3</sup> Václav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless', in Václav Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (Hutchinson: London 1985; essay first published in samizdat 1979), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Fernando Henrique Cardoso, 'On the Characterization of Authoritarian Regimes in Latin America', in David Collier (ed.), *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

became a dissident and civil society theorist, is at pains to explain that the interests of the transnational capitalist class do *not* sufficiently explain the resurgence of authoritarianism. Liberal democracy is quite adequate to their needs, and in some respects gives them better opportunities, than a strong authoritarian state provided that the political clout of the workforce is kept in check. Instead, difficult though this is to accept for the Marxist-oriented South American left, 'bureaucratic authoritarianism is politically profitable for the civilian and military bureaucrats that hold state office'.<sup>7</sup> The expression 'politically profitable' here would seem to suggest that Cardoso thought not just in terms of private gain, but also and perhaps more in terms of perpetuation in power. This explains why, contrary to what one would expect of a 'dependent capitalist' state, state involvement in the economy, already large in Brazil, only grew during the military dictatorship. Konrad, devoid of illusions about ideology, puts it even more starkly. Politicians, whether East or West, are 'professionals of power', he argues: 'if we don't believe that a great painter paints because it's the way to God or riches, then why should we think that the great born politicians want power for some ulterior reason, good or bad, rather than for the sake of power itself?'<sup>8</sup>

### *Constructivists: ideology*

Others believe that it is in fact the ideology that rules, and those in power serve it. Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman deviates from most other South American commentators in characterising the Argentine *junta* as not only fascist and anti-Semitic, but also as 'totalitarian'. He locates the roots of this totalitarian worldview in a military class that has long been separated from civilian life and increasingly cultivated a series of 'fantasies' based on fear rather than on a utopia of a desirable society.<sup>9</sup> Timerman's claim is well substantiated. He documents how, in its relatively short rule (1976–1983), the Argentine *junta* not only killed large numbers of social scientists and psychiatrists suspected of left-wing sympathies, but attempted to eliminate the suspect disciplines of sociology, philosophy and psychiatry altogether.<sup>10</sup> Michnik also follows Arendt in the belief that the greatest source of totalitarian power lay in 'their ability to infect us with their own hatred and contempt'<sup>11</sup> rather than in the force of jail and jackboot.

These accounts emphasise the destructive aspirations of early authoritarian rule. In order to consolidate, they must stop the natural flow of social change. Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman imputes to the Pinochet regime nothing less than the ambition to 'abolish time, freeze history, colonize space'.<sup>12</sup> Polish writer Kazimierz

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> George Konrad, *Antipolitics* (London: Quartet Books, 1984), p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name; Cell Without a Number* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93–9.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Michnik, 'A New Evolutionism', in Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1985, essay first published in *samizdat* 1979), p. xix.

<sup>12</sup> Ariel Dorfman, 'Epilogue: October 1989', in Susan Meiselas (ed.), *Chile from Within* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1990), p. 121.

Brandys also uses an icy metaphor: 'A totalitarian state frozen in terror gleams like a glacier from the distance.'<sup>13</sup>

But it cannot, and the initial passionate agents of ideology evolve into a post-totalitarian universe where everyone serves ideology *without* being genuine believers. Havel's post-totalitarian system is a self-propelling machine, in which even political leaders are just cogs:

Western Sovietologists often exaggerate the role of individuals in the post-totalitarian system and overlook the fact that the ruling figures, despite the immense power they possess through the centralized structure of power, are often no more than blind executors of the system's own internal laws – laws they themselves never can, and never do, reflect upon. In any case experience has taught us again and again that this automatism is far more powerful than the will of any individual; and should someone possess a more independent will, he or she must conceal it behind a ritually anonymous mask in order to have an opportunity to enter the power hierarchy at all.<sup>14</sup>

Brandys expresses the manner which the system is maintained by the people themselves in a similar way: 'it may be that most essential mechanism in the system known as communism is this curious twofold one: the counterfeiting and the denying of the self'.<sup>15</sup> In this analysis, collective self-limitation has taken the place of Timmerman's ideology of hatred and Konrad and Cardoso's will to power.

### *Atomisation*

The differences between the East European and the South American writers are much more a matter of atmosphere than of analysis. In Eastern Europe, the symbols of repression are the spy and the tank, in South America it is the torture chamber. At the level of personal reflection, South Americans express a bodily fear of pain, whereas the East European nightmare is more one of mental claustrophobia.

But when they express their fears not on a personal but on a societal level, it is the same: of atomisation, of each individual being isolated from all his peers through the machinations of the regime. The Czech Catholic mathematician Václav Benda expresses it in the following terms: 'The Iron Curtain does not just exist between the East and the West: it also separates individual nations in the East, individual regions, individual towns and villages, individual factories, individual families, and even the individuals within those entities from each other.'<sup>16</sup> Konrad too, speaks of the Iron Curtain as being 'in our heads'.<sup>17</sup> Havel puts it in more existential terms: 'The post-totalitarian system is mounting a total assault on humans and humans stand against it alone, abandoned and isolated.'<sup>18</sup> Ariel Dorfman describes Chileans under Pinochet in very similar words: 'isolated from

<sup>13</sup> Kazimierz Brandys, *A Warsaw Diary 1978–1981* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Brandys, *Warsaw Diary*, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Václav Benda, in Václav Benda et al. (eds), 'Parallel Polis, or an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe: An Inquiry', *Social Research*, 55:1–2 (1988), p. 218.

<sup>17</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 67.



each other, their means of communicating suppressed, their connections cut off, their senses blocked by fear.<sup>19</sup>

Both Havel and Dorfman, while sharing the more general assumption that it is the 'regime' or 'system' that wills atomisation, also connect it to the passive consumerism of modern man. Thus, in the Frankfurter School tradition, they see their own societies as especially morbid varieties of a more general phenomenon. 'There is obviously in modern humanity a certain tendency towards the creation of such a system [...] some connection with the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice material certainties.' Eastern Europe (or indeed South America) can then be seen as standing as 'a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies'.<sup>20</sup>

Jacobo Timerman captures the atomisation in the very title of his book *Prisoner without a name, cell without a number*. In reality, Timerman was one of the most high-profile Argentine prisoners of conscience, and his international fame may have contributed to his eventual release. Yet he felt the isolation equally in the early days of his arrest. He opens the book with the pivotal experience of a night during which he and an anonymous fellow prisoner had eye-contact for hours because the tiny peepholes of their opposing cells were left open: 'you were my brother, my father, my son, my friend. Or are you a woman? If so, we passed that night as lovers [...] that flutter of movement proved conclusively that I was not the last human survivor on earth amid this universe of torturing custodians.'<sup>21</sup>

## Features of a proto-civil society

### *Solidarity*

In less poetic terms, many documents emphasise the importance of friendship and communication as a last line of defence and first point of departure for a civil society, before and beyond the emergence of any more overtly political formation.

According to Brazilian political scientist Francisco Weffort, the 'discovery that there was something more to politics than the State began with the simplest facts of life of the persecuted. In the most difficult moments, they had to make use of what they found around them. There were no parties to go to, nor courts in which they could have confidence. At a difficult time, the primary recourse was the family, friends, and in some cases fellow workers. If there was a legal chance of defence, they had to look for a courageous lawyer. And, above all, someone who is persecuted can always, as an old Brazilian proverb says, "complain to the bishop". What are we talking about if not civil society, though still at the molecular level of interpersonal relations?'<sup>22</sup> Konrad too writes '(w)ithdrawal into our huddled private circles enabled us to survive even the grimmest years of the

<sup>19</sup> Dorfman, 'A Rural Chilean Legend Comes True', *New York Times* (18 February 1985), reproduced in *Chile from Within*, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, pp. 38–9.

<sup>21</sup> Timerman, *Prisoner*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>22</sup> Francisco Weffort, 'Why Democracy?', in Alfred Stepan (ed.), *Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989; essay written in 1983), p. 347.



dictatorship. We didn't really live in a state of constant tension because every evening we could be with one another. We talked a great deal; congregated in our lairs, we experienced a kind of campfire warmth.<sup>23</sup> He further points out that it was not by accident that the largest East European democracy movement was called 'Solidarity'.<sup>24</sup>

### *Living in the truth*

But there is more to this molecular civil society than solidarity or 'campfire warmth'. Another key element repeated by many sources is that of communication, beginning more or less underground but reaching ever wider circles. This has two aspects. The first is the assertion of 'truth' unacceptable to the regime.

It is in these terms that Polish writer Kazimierz Brandys explains switching from trying to slip writings past censors to writing openly for the new independent magazine *Zapis*: '[. . .] are we deceiving the tyrant or is he deceiving us? Is it not true that in exchange for the chance to publish poetry, we give up on stating the values that that poetry conceals, from which it arose, and to which it makes reference [. . .] If that is the case, then one may suspect that we are paying too high a price.'<sup>25</sup>

It was also along this path that the Madres de Plaza de Mayo evolved, first searching for their children each on their own, then 'all for all the children'.<sup>26</sup> In the early years they wrote information about their missing children on banknotes in order to achieve maximum circulation.<sup>27</sup> After the disappearance and presumed death of their first leader, Azucena de Villaflor, the Madres took the difficult decision to remain out in the open, continuing to congregate on the Plaza de Mayo and other town squares.<sup>28</sup> This was both a strategic decision, calculating that in a fundamentally unsafe situation, publicity might actually provide more security than secrecy, and a principled decision that a just cause should not have to go underground.<sup>29</sup> Václav Havel, while many other elements of his work may be considered as constructivist or post-modernist, asserts an unambiguous belief in 'living in the truth', that is, openly asserting one's lack of belief in the official ideology. Havel and other members of Charter 77 emphasise time and again that the force of the Chartists lay not in their (small) number, but in the fact that they asserted themselves at all and communicated their heretic beliefs to others. Anyone who refuses to acknowledge the system 'denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety'.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 203.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>25</sup> Brandys, *Warsaw Diary*, p. 43; see also, J. M. Bates, 'The "Second Circulation 1976–1989 Poland"', in Derek Jones (ed.), *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Alejandro Diago, *Hebe Bonafini. Memoria y esperanza* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Dialectica, 1988), p. 119.

<sup>27</sup> Diago, *Bonafini*, p. 122.

<sup>28</sup> Ulises Gorini, *La Rebelión de las Madres. Historia de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Tomo I (1976–1983)* (Buenos Aires [etc.]: Norma, 2006), pp. 186–7.

<sup>29</sup> Diago, *Bonafini*, p. 123; Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora, *Memoria, Verdad y Justicia, a los 30 años X los treinta mil: Voces de la Memoria* (Buenos Aires: Baobab, 2006), pp. 31–2.

<sup>30</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 40; see also Brandys, *Warsaw Diary*, p. 56.

Jacobo Timerman, too, kept his newspaper *La Opinion* open, and continued to print information about disappeared people, on this basis: 'I know that I saved the lives of some, and believe others were killed merely because *La Opinion* demanded knowledge of their whereabouts. But in the long run the battle, it seems to me, had to be fought, so that at least there *was* a battle, embryonic as it might be.'<sup>31</sup> Ariel Dorfman, while admiring the bravery and stamina of those who kept confronting the regime, comments a little more wearily that for many years the frequent but small protests had the 'ritualistic, circular quality' of a 'morality play directed at bystanders that were too scared to join or at the armed forces who were too walled-in to listen.'<sup>32</sup>

### *Plurality*

But while these voices emphasise the open expression of dissent, others are less focused on the publicity and more on the reassertion of plurality and exchange of ideas as a value. Charter 77 characterises itself as an 'open community of people of different convictions, different faiths and different opinions'.<sup>33</sup> Their numbers included proponents of pop culture, people of Catholic and protestant backgrounds, and ex-Marxist intellectuals. Nonetheless, the shades of difference between Czechoslovak dissidents in their conceptualisation of a 'parallel polis', 'second culture', or 'civil society'<sup>34</sup> appear to the contemporary reader as very small. It seems as if they discuss and analyse these differences almost for the pleasure of disagreeing with each other, relishing them as in themselves an exercise in opposing the monolithic official ideology. Their Hungarian counterpart Konrad appears to suggest as much: 'Theoretical discussion is inherently more dignified than power struggle. We can become an adult nation if we introduce ideological pluralism in preparation for the political pluralism that will come in due time.'<sup>35</sup> This creates an 'uncontrollable sea of private conversations' regardless of state or government.<sup>36</sup> It is worth recognising of course that this idealised version of pluralism may not always have reflected the realities in civil society. Moreover, the experience in Poland, where internal democracy and debate within Solidarity were curtailed precisely when it began to engage in serious negotiations with the government<sup>37</sup> may reflect a wider phenomenon.

The commitment to pluralism raises questions that are now at the heart of debates in Western societies about the limits of pluralism in a democratic society. Concern with the value and limits of pluralism also drives current discussions about the role of Islamist forces in the uncertain political transitions of the Arab

<sup>31</sup> Timerman, *Prisoner*, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Dorfman, 'Reports from the Heart of the NO', *Village Voice* (4 October 1988), reproduced in *Chile from Within*, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> Charter 77 Declaration (1 January 1977), available at: {[http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration\\_of\\_charter\\_77.pdf](http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration_of_charter_77.pdf)} last accessed on 11 June 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Benda et al., 'Parallel Polis', pp. 211–46.

<sup>35</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>37</sup> Jadwiga Staniszkis, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 50.

world. In the common cause against the state, civil society was conceptualised as *e pluribus unum*. In Eastern Europe, the possibility of multiple, incommensurable civil societies was apparently not entertained.

In South America with its much shorter history of less perfect totalitarianism, this is different. Pluralism tends to be perceived as a practical problem more than a value in itself.<sup>38</sup> Yet it could be argued that it is asserted indirectly through the more minimal collective commitment to rejection of violence (see below).

### *Non – violence*

Violence is uppermost in the reflections of many South American writers. Timerman describes Argentina, not just during the *junta* but historically, as possessing an infinite capacity for violence in combination with a political incapacity for pluralism. He calls terrorism and violence ‘the sole creative potential, the sole imaginative, emotional, erotic expression’ of the Argentine nation.<sup>39</sup> He then asks the following question, which can be considered as one of the lead questions for this article: ‘Can the community alone, without outside intervention, prevent either of the two fascisms from winding up with Argentina’s corpse?’<sup>40</sup>

Francisco Weffort, writing in Brazil after the ruling military had begun to ‘open up’, answers this question definitively in the affirmative. He describes a recent history of Brazil where, similar to pre-*junta* Argentina, the main expression of politics, right or left, was in terms of violence. But under the military regime ‘right-wing violence took on industrial proportions’,<sup>41</sup> the destructive potential of which frightened the government itself almost as much as it frightened the opposition, to the point that ‘an area of consensus has been created around the elimination of terror’.<sup>42</sup> It was this insight, according to Weffort, which produced in a wide variety of political actors ‘the discovery of civil society as a political space’.<sup>43</sup> The Madres of the Plaza del Mayo too, affirm in their declaration of principles that ‘we stand against violence and against every type of terrorism, private or state’,<sup>44</sup> a statement that at least some of their children might not have agreed with prior to their disappearance.

In Konrad, even more than in Weffort, civil society is not just a choice for non-violence, it is the very anti-thesis of violence: ‘military society is the reality, civil society is the utopia’.<sup>45</sup> Unlike other sources, and much more like Western peace activists of the same era, his nightmares are less of the gun, prison camp or

<sup>38</sup> Dorfman, ‘Exile’s Return’, *Village Voice* (6 October 1987), reproduced in *Chile from Within*, p. 113; Manuel Antonio Garretón, ‘Popular Mobilization and the Military Regime in Chile: The Complexities of the Invisible Transition’, in Susan Eckstein (ed.), *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 269, 275.

<sup>39</sup> Timerman, *Prisoner*, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Weffort, ‘Why Democracy?’, p. 341.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>44</sup> Madres de Plaza de Mayo, ‘Declaración de Principios’ (22 August 1979), available at: {<http://www.madresfundadoras.org.ar/pagina/declaracindepincipiosao1979/24>} last accessed on 11 June 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 92.

torture chamber than of the ‘global Auschwitz’ of nuclear annihilation.<sup>46</sup> Reflections on violence play a much smaller role in the work of other East Europeans, but their conclusions are largely the same: they too have opted for nonviolent resistance for both ‘realistic’ and ethical reasons. Havel echoes the Gandhian sentiment 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.’<sup>47</sup>

It is necessary, however, to recognise that this widespread revulsion is by no means the inevitable response to a surfeit of violence. Ariel Dorfman describes how ‘Our hands are clean’ has become a dominant slogan in anti-Pinochet demonstrations in 1985. He speculates that most Chileans reject a violent solution, both ‘out of realism’ and for ‘deeper moral reasons’. However, he ends the piece by saying ‘there is a limit to our patience. Let it be remembered, in the future, that if we are forced to resort to other methods to liberate ourselves, we wanted our hands to remain clean.’<sup>48</sup> Less than a year later, after a failed attempt on Pinochet’s life, he writes that ‘the hopes for a peaceful transition to democracy seem to have been dashed’, and that whereas the Chilean Communist party had traditionally aligned itself with peaceful methods, many on the far left began to believe that armed resistance was the only way to bring the regime down. He ends the article with ‘more violence will beget more violence. Is it already too late?’<sup>49</sup> As we know, with the benefit of hindsight, the transition in Chile was largely peaceful, but Dorfman’s words should remind us that there was no inevitable path-dependency here, but perhaps rather an agency of restraint.

In follow-up research I intend to track the more submerged voices of those who did favour violent solutions, and consider their motivations, and why they did not become dominant in the situations in question.

### *On ‘independence’ and organisational forms*

The East European and South American activists have sometimes been seen by later generations of scholars as responsible for a ‘purist’ view of civil society free from the pathologies of state and market.<sup>50</sup> A closer consideration of the actual ideas they had on the topic turns out to belie this claim.

In 1987, a Western social scientist asked a number of Czechoslovak dissidents whether they thought the term ‘independent society’ was relevant and meaningful to their conditions. They reacted to the proposition with great caution. Václav Benda held that what he conceptualised as a parallel polis ‘cannot completely

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 71; see also Milan Simecka in ‘Parallel Polis’, p. 225.

<sup>48</sup> Dorfman, ‘In Chile, A Show of Hands’, *New York Times* (23 November 1985), reproduced in *Chile from Within*, pp. 108–9.

<sup>49</sup> Dorfman, ‘A Hopeful Parable of Doom’, *Philadelphia Inquirer* (13 March 1983), reproduced in Ariel Dorfman, *Other Septembers, Many Americas; Selected Provocations 1980–2004* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004) pp. 146–50.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance Neera Chandhoke, ‘The Limits of Global Civil Society’, in Marlies Glasius, Mary Kaldor and Helmut Anheier (eds), *Global Civil Society 2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 36–7; John Keane, ‘Eleven Theses on Markets and Civil Society’, *Journal of Civil Society*, 1:1 (2005), p. 26.

ignore the official social structures' and that the parallel concept instead 'stresses variety, but not complete independence.'<sup>51</sup> Political theorist Milan Simecka held that one could speak of 'independent thinking', but certainly not yet independent society.<sup>52</sup> Former journalist Jiri Dienstbier held that the term 'independent society', unlike civil society, contained an unrealistic and indeed undesirable implication that the state could and should 'wither away'.<sup>53</sup> Václav Havel pointed out that there are only relative gradations of dependence and independence, but that the 'relatively independent enclave' enriches society as a whole.<sup>54</sup> Chilean psychiatrist and playwright Marco Antonio de la Parra describes the same relative contamination and regeneration more poetically in his introduction to a photo album on the Pinochet years: 'We were irresolute, oblique; we hid our hands, lowered our eyes. Those who spoke up, stood up straight, were few. But at the same time these photographs show the country did not submit, we kept life vibrant, our hearts alive.'<sup>55</sup>

Decisions as to what organisational form the manifestations of civil society should take turn out to have been less a matter of principle and more dictated by pragmatic circumstances. Calling oneself an 'organisation' and registering membership, can increase the risks for members. Registering legally as an organisation is sometimes simply not allowed, but when it is it can have practical advantages, such as the possibility to collect and receive money in the name of the organisation.<sup>56</sup> Although these kinds of decisions can have political implications as well, the issue appears not to have been of fundamental importance to its protagonists. Both the signatories to Charter 77 and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo placed a high value on the public nature of their activities, on being out in the open and bearing witness. The two organisations, very different in many other ways, both explicitly insist on not being a political opposition movement. The Charter 'does not form the basis for any oppositional political activity'.<sup>57</sup> The Madres are 'not moved by any political objective'.<sup>58</sup>

The Madres decided, after more than two years of demonstrations, to register as a civic association. Charter 77 on the other hand insisted that is 'is not an organization; it has no rules, permanent bodies or formal membership. It embraces everyone who agrees with its ideas, participates in its work, and supports it.'<sup>59</sup> But according to one of the Chartists, Václav Cerny: 'the considerations about how it is to be run and what form this will take [...] may change [...] it all depends on considerations of need, suitability and effectiveness'.<sup>60</sup>

Poland's *Solidarity* is a case in point. According to Jadwiga Staniszkis, one of its advisors drawn from the ranks of dissident intellectuals, the circumstances of its development required 'the painful process of cramming that radical wave of protest

<sup>51</sup> Benda, 'Parallel Polis', p. 217.

<sup>52</sup> Simecka, 'Parallel Polis', p. 222.

<sup>53</sup> Dienstbier, 'Parallel Polis', p. 230.

<sup>54</sup> Havel, 1979/1985, p. 237.

<sup>55</sup> Manuel Antonio de la Parra, 'Fragments of a Self-Portrait', in *Chile from Within*, pp. 14–5.

<sup>56</sup> Madres, Declaracion and Janos Vargha, 'Acceptance speech', Right Livelihood Awards (9 December 1985), available at: {[http://www.rightlivelihood.org/vargha\\_speech.html](http://www.rightlivelihood.org/vargha_speech.html)} last accessed on 11 June 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Charter 77.

<sup>58</sup> Madres, Declaracion, translation author's own.

<sup>59</sup> Charter 77.

<sup>60</sup> Václav Cerny in Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 133.

and class war into a “trade union formula”, when in reality it oscillated being a mass movement and a “political party of activists”.<sup>61</sup>

Organisational form, then, would appear to be a matter of expediency, not a fundamental feature of civil society in authoritarian settings. This cavalier attitude to organisational form may have fitted pre-transition circumstances in the 1980s. What it did to organisations during and after transition, and whether such an attitude is sustainable in current circumstances where authoritarian regimes and Western democracy-builders may be fostering competing versions of ‘civil society’, is beyond the scope of this article, as is the role communications technology is playing in reshaping organisational form under authoritarian rule.

## **Strategies and aspirations**

### *Appeal to law and human rights*

Practically all the sources used appeal to laws, and more generally the ‘rule of law’ as a principle that is helpful to them. The Charter 77 Declaration is entirely based on this principle: it begins by stating that the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (ICESCR) have been incorporated into Czechoslovak national law in 1976, and then goes on to enumerate at length how some of the rights set forth in these Covenants are in practice violated in Czechoslovakia.<sup>62</sup> The Madres in their Declaration point out that they do not demand freedom for their children but treatment according to the law: to know where they are, what they are accused of, to be judged according to legal norms with a right to be defended; to not be tortured; to be held in suitable conditions, etc.<sup>63</sup>

Both were undoubtedly aware that the authorities were not serious about their commitments to these legal norms. But the point that Havel for instance makes is that unlike ‘some ephemeral dictatorship run by a Ugandan bandit’,<sup>64</sup> bureaucratic authoritarianism needs the ‘ritually cohesive force’ of legal form: ‘it wraps the base exercise of power in the noble apparel of the letter of the law’.<sup>65</sup> Dorfman considers the plebiscite announced by Pinochet in the same light: an attempt to achieve the appearance of an endorsement for ‘more permanent structures of repression’.<sup>66</sup> ‘What limits’, he asks, ‘should be placed on one’s participation in a legal system which one rejects? Is it better to abstain? Or is it better to uncomfortably sabotage the system from within?’

Havel and the Chartists clearly opted for the second option: ‘A persistent and never-ending appeal to the laws – not just the laws concerning human rights, but

<sup>61</sup> Staniszkis, *Self-limiting Revolution*, pp. 17, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Charter 77.

<sup>63</sup> Madres Declaracion.

<sup>64</sup> Havel is referring of course to the brief, brutal and erratic rule of Idi Amin. Interestingly, the ‘non-party democracy’ of Yoweri Museveni that has been in power in Uganda since 1986 is much closer to the bureaucratic rule described in this article, and does show the ostensible regard for law described by Havel.

<sup>65</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, pp. 75, 73.

<sup>66</sup> Dorfman, ‘Exile’s Return’, p. 114.



to all laws – does not mean at all that those who do so have succumbed to the illusion that in our system the law is anything other than what it is. They are well aware of the role it plays. But precisely because they know how desperately the system depends on it, on the ‘noble’ version of the law, that is – they also know how enormously significant such appeals are.<sup>67</sup> The ostensible commitment to predetermined, impersonal rules, based on national and international legal traditions, gives activists some leverage when they express themselves in this language.

Francisco Weffort too sets out to explain how law was gradually perverted in 20th century Brazil by increasing ‘*casuismos*’: instrumental use of it by whoever is in power. Yet, he says, ‘the most constant theme in Brazilian politics since 1968 has been the re-establishment of a State of Law’.<sup>68</sup> He argues that although initially liberals, liberal elements of the regime and leftists meant different things by this term, it was a creative ambiguity that eventually converged into ‘shades of the same general democratic aspiration’.<sup>69</sup> Most Chilean groups too, finally did decide to participate in Pinochet’s self-endorsement plebiscite, giving it so much reality that Pinochet in the end failed to manipulate or rig it as Dorfman had earlier predicted.

#### *Relation to the ‘international community’*

Jacobo Timerman asks, immediately after his question quoted above about the Argentine community’s own capacity to overcome fascism: ‘is collaboration possible among the international community to [. . .] enable Argentina’s reincorporation into civilized society?’<sup>70</sup> This of course is the question most often posed in the West in relation to authoritarian regimes, and accompanied by virulent debate about the historically tainted concept of a ‘civilized society’, and whose fault it is if certain societies are ‘not civilized’. But Timerman barely attempts to answer his own question, and most of the sources consulted here are curiously unconcerned with it.

East Europeans, Konrad above all, of course demonstrate an awareness of the relation between their national predicament and the wider context of superpower rivalry. Konrad in fact names the problem not ‘communism’ or ‘totalitarianism’, but ‘Yalta’. But it is precisely because they perceive this situation as stuck, and beyond their control, that they turn to the bottom-up reform of their own societies as a priority.<sup>71</sup> They do not ask either Western governments or Western publics to ‘do’ anything in particular. Indeed, when describing the subtly electrifying effect of the visit of John Paul II in 1979 on the Polish public, Brandys writes ‘we make ourselves ridiculous when we try to instruct the Americans or the French in how best to act and think. Our past is different from theirs; we have no part in their lives [. . .] But they too have no basis for instructing us in how to think and act, for they know even less about us.’<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 76.

<sup>68</sup> Weffort, *Why Democracy?*, p. 342.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>70</sup> Timerman, *Prisoner*, p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> See for instance Konrad, *Antipolitics*, pp. 116–24; also Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 89.

<sup>72</sup> Brandys, *Warsaw Diary*, p. 83.



South American sources, although placing their countries' trajectory against the background of dependency theory<sup>73</sup> and reflecting awareness of US involvement in the Chilean coup in particular, appear to have been even less inclined to have expectations of, or make demands on, European or American publics or governments.

Yet the international does feature in a different way: in the self-identification of many of the actors discussed here. Janos Vargha, a Hungarian environmental activist, begins his acceptance speech for the Right Livelihood Award with a story from *Gulliver's Travels* and goes on to mention deleterious dam projects in Brazil, Egypt, West Germany, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and the USSR, and anti-dam activism in the Philippines, the USSR and Austria before actually describing his own group, the Danube Circle.<sup>74</sup> Thus he places himself and his group in the context of the emerging global anti-dam movement. Jacobo Timerman uses examples from Nazi Germany and the contemporary USSR to analyse the Argentinian situation, and identifies himself (to the confusion of his persecutors) as both an international liberal and an international Zionist.<sup>75</sup> Ariel Dorfman in his many short pieces takes inspiration from the *I have a dream* speech of Martin Luther King, the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marques and numerous other especially literary sources from all over the world as relevant to the Chilean predicament.<sup>76</sup>

Gyorgy Konrad however is the one who gives such identification with likeminded people elsewhere an explicit place in relation to the local reconstitution of civil society: 'the trip abroad, the forming of friendships with others across the frontier – these are some of the elements of the intellectuals' struggle for freedom; the international Solidarity of the craft is their mutual defence alliance'.<sup>77</sup> But he does not intend this, as we now tend to do when we invoke 'global civil society', in instrumental terms. On the contrary, he writes,

we ought to avoid becoming a major theater of operations for the world's communications media [. . .] International public opinion's approval and disapproval are transient things, matters of fashion [. . .] we should accord the foreign media only a limited role, as auxiliaries in our enterprise.<sup>78</sup>

Instead, the self-identification as a citizen of the world, against the rigidity and brutality of the state, appears to have primarily a morale-boosting function.

### *The timing of democratisation*

While it is rarely possible to pinpoint precisely when a democratisation process begins, and when, if ever, it is completed, there is a paradox in comparing the East

<sup>73</sup> Jose Serra, 'Three Mistaken Theses Regarding the Connection between Industrialization and Authoritarian Regimes', in David Collier (ed.), *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 99–163; Cardoso, 'On the Characterization'; Fernando Henrique Cardoso, 'Associated-Dependent Development and Democratic Theory', in Alfred Stepan (ed.), *Democratizing Brazil: problems of transition and consolidation* (New York: Oxford University Press 1989, essay written in 1983), pp. 299–326.

<sup>74</sup> Vargha, 'Acceptance speech'.

<sup>75</sup> Timerman, *Prisoner*.

<sup>76</sup> See for instance Dorfman, 'A Hopeful Parable'; Dorfman, 'Martin Luther King: A Latin American Perspective', *Irish Times* (20 August 2003), reproduced in Dorfman, *Other Septembers*, pp. 101–6.

<sup>77</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 212.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

European experience with that of at least two of the South American countries. The decades-long East European domination by the party-state was abruptly converted into a series of multi-party democracies without any special role for the Communist party, while the much shorter military dictatorships of Brazil and Chile went through a decade or more of managed transition before the military had entirely returned to the barracks.

But in both cases, the writings consulted for this article on the whole reveal a curious lack of impatience about, or even reflection on, the timing of transition to democracy. There is lots of detailed and dated reflection in these writings on the recent past, but with the exception of one expression of despair by Ariel Dorfman at general Pinochet's 1986 announcement that he would stay in power until 1997,<sup>79</sup> reflection on the future does not come with dates. Indeed, Brandys uses the example of India to argue that 'sometimes, a nation wins such battles over two or three generations [. . .] It is a struggle for oneself. Not only a struggle for freedom. We ourselves are transformed in it.'<sup>80</sup>

Brazilians were convinced that they were on the road to some sort of democratisation from at least 1983, whilst Chileans remained uncertain that there would be a transition until after the 1988 plebiscite. But both were convinced that the transition would be long, and the depth of transformation doubtful. East Europeans were under the impression as late as 1988 that no discernible transition at the top could be expected any time soon.

But the focus of their concerns is not on transformation at the top. Poland's leading dissident Adam Michnik was the first to express this lack of faith in transformation at the top in 1976.<sup>81</sup> In many other writings, this is implicit. They are much more interested in transformation at the bottom. Konrad even seems, somewhat disingenuously perhaps, to express a complete lack of interest in a change of system when he says: 'Let the government stay on top, we will live our own lives underneath it.'<sup>82</sup>

Most authors did believe that sooner or later the widening and deepening of 'civil society' as discussed above would have consequences for the regime, just not very precisely datable ones. As Havel puts it, the 'primary purpose of the outward direction of these movements is always, as we have seen, to have an impact on society, not to affect the power structure, at least not directly and immediately.'<sup>83</sup> Benda expresses himself in Gramscian terms of trench warfare: 'Given the time and the means available, only a certain number of trenches can be eliminated. If, at the same time, the parallel polis is able to produce more trenches than it loses, a situation arises that is mortally dangerous for the regime.'<sup>84</sup> Chilean social scientist Manuel Antonio Garretón, more descriptively, writes that 'civil society has reasserted itself to the point where it has room to organise and express itself.' He calls this the 'invisible transition to democracy' which predated the visible

<sup>79</sup> Dorfman, 'Pinochet Has Reaped What He Has Sown', *New York Times* (8 September 1986), reproduced in Meiselas, *Chile from Within* (New York), p. 111.

<sup>80</sup> Brandys, *Warsaw Diary*, p. 256.

<sup>81</sup> Michnik, 'New Evolutionism', pp. 136–8, see also Cardoso, below, on the statist vision of democracy.

<sup>82</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 198.

<sup>83</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 82.

<sup>84</sup> Benda, 'Parallel Polis', p. 219.

transition at the top.<sup>85</sup> Judit Vasxheiyi, a librarian and environmental activist of the Hungarian Danube Circle, also gives the mobilisation of ‘biologists, architects, artists, historians, lawyers, sociologists and teachers’, later joined by ‘manual workers and [...] non-urban population’ to oppose a hydro-electric dam project the extraordinary name ‘democratization’.<sup>86</sup>

What appears to have characterised both the South American and the East European situations is that civil societies of a certain width and depth, manifesting themselves not only in mobilisation but also displaying the elements of solidarity, truth-telling and plurality predated the transition at the top by several, sometimes many years.

*Aspirations (or what democracy is)*

The East European and South American ‘civil societies’ or ‘democratisation movements’ have gone down in history as desiring, and achieving, democracy, or even more narrowly speaking, ‘liberal democracy’. There is no doubt that the six countries under particular consideration here achieved fairly successful liberal democracies. But was this what the activists had aspired to? Why then the emphasis on civil society, which had not been an important theme of mainstream political theory in the West?<sup>87</sup>

There turns out to be a remarkable resemblance between the ideas East European and South American formulated as the utopian opposite of the regimes they lived under. What they point to, again, is less a change in government and more a structural change in state-society relations.

Francisco Weffort states in the middle of the long drawn-out democratisation process in Brazil in 1983: ‘We want a civil society, we need it to defend ourselves from the monstrous state in front of us.’<sup>88</sup> Weffort still cautiously suggests that if there is no civil society yet, it has to be invented. Konrad writing in Hungary at almost the same time already saw an ‘independent ferment’ the success of which ‘cannot be measured by the replacement of one government by another, but by the fact that under the same government society is growing stronger, independent people are multiplying, and the network of conversations uncontrollable from above is becoming denser.’<sup>89</sup> Weffort discusses a Brazilian political legacy that, underneath a veneer of liberal democracy, was fundamentally statist and indeed authoritarian:

The superimposition of democratic forms on authoritarian relations, the prevalence of statist ideology even among those who called themselves anti-statist, and the resulting acceptance of coup-making as an everyday form of political action, are all characteristics which cut across left/right divisions. We are capable of calling authoritarianism democracy, and an act of usurpation is called a revolution.

<sup>85</sup> Garreton, ‘Popular Mobilization’.

<sup>86</sup> Judit Vasxheiyi, ‘Acceptance speech’, Right Livelihood Awards (9 December 1985), available at: {[http://www.rightlivelihood.org/vargha\\_speech.html](http://www.rightlivelihood.org/vargha_speech.html)}, last accessed on 14 June 2010.

<sup>87</sup> It barely features for instance in Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: a Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) or Robert Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

<sup>88</sup> Weffort, *Why Democracy?*, p. 349.

<sup>89</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 198.

But in the 1970s and 1980s, on the left *and* the right, a process of abdication of this legacy takes place:

If the State had formerly been the solution, now it was the problem. If before it had been possible to call 'democracy' what were merely juridico-institutional forms of democracy, it was possible no longer. Out of an ambiguous historical legacy new meanings had to be developed, and, slowly and fearfully, democracy began to be seen not as a means to power but as an end in itself. Yet if politics were to have a new meaning, a new sphere of freedom for political action had to be developed. For political Brazil, civil society, previously either ignored or seen as an inert mass, began to signify that sphere of freedom.<sup>90</sup>

If this was only a call for 'less state, more society' it could be read as either an anarchic or a libertarian reaction to statist conditions. But the ideas of Konrad, Havel, Dienstbier, Cardoso and Weffort go further and bear a deeper resemblance to each other than that. The political freedoms of liberal democracy are a necessary but not sufficient condition for their aspirations. Multi-party elections appear to be even less a sufficient condition: 'people [. . .] know [. . .] that the question of whether one or several political parties are in power, and how these parties define and label themselves, is of far less importance than the question of whether or not it is possible to live like a human being.'<sup>91</sup> According to Konrad, Europe's historical reality deserves richer organisational forms than those offered by the moralistic dichotomy of American capitalism and Russian communism.<sup>92</sup>

### *Democratic practices*

What they believe civil society to have begun developing during authoritarian rule, is democratic practices at the levels closest to citizens: among neighbours, between women<sup>93</sup> or in the workplace.<sup>94</sup> Konrad too points out that: 'workplace and local community self-government, based on personal contact, exercised daily, and always subject to correction, have greater attraction in our part of the world than multiparty representative democracy because, if they have the choice, people are not content with voting once every four years just to choose their deputy or the head of government'.<sup>95</sup> Chilean feminists even applied this concept of democracy to the private realm with their slogan 'Democracy in the country and in the home.'<sup>96</sup>

Far-reaching consequences are attached to these developments. Havel describes a utopia of a post-democratic system consisting of 'structures [that] should naturally arise from *below* as a consequence of authentic social self-organization; they should derive vital energy from a living dialogue with the genuine needs from which they arise, and when these needs are gone, the structures should also

<sup>90</sup> Weffort, *Why Democracy?*, p. 329.

<sup>91</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 52.

<sup>92</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 34.

<sup>93</sup> Garreton, 'Popular Mobilization', pp. 271–2.

<sup>94</sup> Cardoso, 'Associated-Dependent Development', p. 314.

<sup>95</sup> Konrad, *Antipolitics*, p. 137.

<sup>96</sup> Patricia Chuchryk, 'Feminist Anti-Authoritarian Politics: The Role of Women's Organizations and the Chilean Transition to Democracy', in Jane Jaquette (ed.), *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 182.

disappear.<sup>97</sup> The inspiration for this vision comes from the ‘informal, non-bureaucratic, dynamic and open communities that comprise the parallel *polis*’ which could be seen as ‘a kind of rudimentary prefiguration, a symbolic model of those more meaningful “post-democratic” political structures that might become the foundation of a better society.’<sup>98</sup> In Havel, it remains somewhat unclear whether his fluid structures would emerge and shrivel within the context of a parliamentary democracy, or instead of it.

Cardoso is much clearer in this respect. He observes that during the Brazilian *abertura*, three conceptions of democracy live side by side: a statist, a liberal and a grassroots conception of democracy. The statist version, proposed by the regime, is very limited: through cautious management, the state could allow the restitution of mediation between state and civil society, on its own terms. In practice this would feature acting for the public good to be located in the executive, guided by a multi-party parliament which can speak but not act, with limited press freedom and freedom of association. The functionalist or liberal version emphasises liberal rights and representation in a broader capitalist setting. The third version, that of the ‘grassroots democrats’, comes very close to Havel’s ideal: ‘autonomous organization of the population around concrete demands – almost always within the reach of and with direct consequences for the well-being of deprived groups of people’.<sup>99</sup>

The first version is quickly discarded by Cardoso as a feature of contemporary politics, but not really a democratic theory at all. In terms of ‘the utopian-theoretical-ideological foundations of the idea of democracy in a mass society in a country with an associated-dependent economy’, in other words in his vision for Brazil, he seeks to combine the second and the third version.

There is an embryonic democratic thought which is not restricted to accepting the party-parliamentary game (although it remains a fundamental part, just as the defense of the dignity of the person and his or her rights remains fundamental to democratic collectivism) as a form of justifying the democratic worldview. Without greater transparency of information and of the decision-making in the firm (whether private or State) and in the bureaucracy (*idem, ibidem*), and without evolving mechanisms for participation and control both through parties and directly by the interested publics, the democratization process will be crippled.<sup>100</sup>

This interaction of the state with a collectively expressed civil society supplementing individual citizenship is similarly prefigured by Jiri Dienstbier, who rejects Havel’s hope for the ‘withering away’ of the state:

If the state does not perform its function, self-organization becomes necessary. The realization of social interests through the strengths inherent in society weakens the totalizing demands of power, which is no longer the only motive force and must begin responding to the needs all the more, the more advanced the self-organization has become. This produces tension which the state power attempts to neutralize sometimes by force, sometimes by pretending the tension does not exist. But when this happens, society enters into a dialogue.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, p. 93.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>99</sup> Cardoso, ‘Associated-Dependent Development’, pp. 311–4.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>101</sup> Dienstbier, ‘Parallel Polis’, p. 230.

Both in Eastern Europe and South America, a vision appears to have been developed, based on the functioning of civil society under authoritarian rule, that combined the achievements of liberal democracy (civil and political rights; multi-party representation) with more radical forms of democracy based in civil society, which could regularly interact with the state-based democratic system. This is not the space for reflecting on what became of these arguments after democratisation got underway.

### **Conclusions – also to be read as hypotheses**

In terms of discussions of the nature of the regimes under consideration here, distinctions between ‘totalitarian’ and ‘authoritarian’ appear to have relatively little purchase. Instead, there appears to be one area of division and two points of broad agreement between many of the sources.

The disagreement is on the motivations of those in power. Some attribute this to a naked will to power underneath a veneer of ideology, some attribute it to a passionate belief in a totalising ideology, and some attribute it to the rule of ideology itself exercised through the disseminating of practices in seeing the emperor’s clothes. The choice for one of these analyses over others appears to be as much in the eye of the beholder as in the nature of the regime. The hypothesis here is then that contemporary authoritarian regimes are best ‘read’ by using these frames in complementarity rather than through classification into one of these types.

There is broad agreement that none of the regimes, not even that of general Pinochet, were mere ‘strong-man’ dictatorships. Under circumstances of modernity, authoritarian regimes require a bureaucracy, an ideology, and a set of legal norms. Each of these elements may at different times have a stabilising or a destabilising effect on the regime. The hypothesis then is that, with the possible exception of parts of Africa or Central Asia, personalised dictatorships are no longer a relevant category. The terms ‘bureaucratic authoritarianism’ (from Cardoso) or ‘post-totalitarianism’ (from Havel) may be more helpful to capture the nature of contemporary regimes, or it may be the case that yet newer forms, more adapted to the contexts of globalisation and democratisation, have since evolved.

Secondly, there is broad agreement that the main thrust of these regimes, their final if never fully realised aspiration, is to freeze and ‘atomise’ society in order to rule for ever. No accounts were found that suggested, as Hannah Arendt’s totalitarian idealtype suggests,<sup>102</sup> that society was to be permanently mobilised. The hypothesis here, and one well worth testing, would be that contemporary authoritarian regimes all aim for atomisation.

In counterpoise to the aspiration to atomise, activists try to build ‘civil societies’ based on the values of solidarity, public truth-telling, ideological pluralism and non-violence. Two hypotheses can be formulated here. The first is that a variety of activists in contemporary authoritarian settings continue to emphasise these same values. The second, and undoubtedly more problematic hypothesis would be that

<sup>102</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951/1973), pp. 389–92.



those civil societies we observe in these settings which most clearly resemble these characteristics have the best chance of eventually evolving into sustainable democracies. When testing this hypothesis it may be useful to consider how the six widely different national contexts this article draws on may nonetheless resemble each other. In particular, they shared long traditions of independent political thought within and outside universities, relatively high levels of development and a well-developed sense of national identity.<sup>103</sup> This hypothesis is particularly worth applying to an analysis of the civil societies of Egypt and Tunisia. To what extent was civil society activism in these settings before the winter of 2011 characterised by commitment to solidarity, public truth-telling, ideological pluralism and non-violence? Can any relation be discerned between such commitment and the unfolding transition trajectories?

The 'independence' of the manifestations of civil society was, according to its protagonists, only relative. Yet they held that the 'relative independence' pursued by some strengthened the capacity for independence in the society as a whole. Hence, the hypothesis would be that the existence of even a small group of activists would have the effect of increasing the space of other citizens for at least 'independent thought' and perhaps 'independent activity'. Against that, and also on the basis of Havel's writing, the hypothesis could be formulated that the existence of a small group of dissidents, as a rather irrelevant 'protected species' can act as a safety valve for the regime whilst creating the impression that the rest of the population is not dissident.

The widespread appeal to 'the law' by activists, whether it be national law or international human rights standards, combined with the insight that bureaucratic authoritarianism requires ostensible adherence to legal norms, leads to the following hypothesis: Appeal to laws can be a productive strategy for civil society because it is a language to which the regime needs to respond. This hypothesis may well have validity in both Chinese and Islamic settings.

The sources consulted demonstrated a vivid awareness of the world beyond their state, but did not request outside actions from either Western governments or Western publics. Perhaps the fact that 'the international' does not feature heavily in the strategic political considerations of East European or South American activists is less surprising than it may seem if we consider that one of the discoveries of this article so far has been that they rejected explicit strategic political considerations *tout court* in favour of the 'slow ripening' (Konrad) of broader social transformations. Nonetheless the outside world had a role to play, but it was constructed as a rather passive one, as an audience, a source of inspiration, or at most a source of moral support. The hypothesis here might be that hubristic expectations of being able and perhaps obliged to 'help' should be replaced with a much more limited role of taking a positive interest in the predicament of civil society actors in authoritarian settings.

Probably the most interesting findings of this article have been those relating to the strategies and aspirations of East European and Latin American activists. Western audiences love the mythology of a brave, non-violent resistance prevailing

<sup>103</sup> Although it must be pointed out that levels of development were and are highly uneven in Brazil, and Czechoslovakians were also split into two national identities, with Czechs clearly dominating the sources used in this article.



over a brutal regime, whether it is the Madres of the Plaza del Mayo or the Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia. More recently, they have been prepared to fall in love all over again with the more doubtful 'colour revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Lebanon and now with the twittering youngsters of the Arab world and Iran. But they have not been attentive to the strategy of building up a 'democratic' civil society for its own sake as opposed to trying to initiate transition at the top, nor to the rich conception of democracy as encompassing workplace, neighbourhood or cultural circles practicing democracy alongside, and in dialogue with state-based institutions.

Both of these features may hold clues *less* for the causes of the initial transition to multi-party elections, which are over-determined by economic and international factors, but more for the *sustainability* of democracy long afterwards. Antonio Gramsci, likely to have been read by many of the people cited in this article, famously said that in the West: 'When the state trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed'.<sup>104</sup> What the East European and Latin American activists may have achieved is perhaps indeed the 'powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' that Gramsci called civil society, not as a system of bourgeois hegemony but as a system of internalised practices of democracy. The Argentine financial crisis for instance threw the political system into confusion, but it was weathered in civil society.

The final hypothesis then, is that the build-up of civil society for its own sake, predating democratisation, combined with the vision of democratic practices entrenched in society supplementing representative democracy are preconditions for the later sustainability of a democratic society.

At the time of writing, we are witnessing a new set of revolutions against authoritarian rule in the Arab world, equally unpredicted by political scientists and as yet uncertain in their outcome. In this light it is even more important once again to draw attention to the sophisticated responses to authoritarian rule in the 1980s, which were so much more than 'rectifying revolutions' aspiring to join the West, and to take seriously the political theory crafted by activists in Iran, Egypt or Belarus.

<sup>104</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1971), p. 238.