

Dissent Today: Law and the Arts from Prague to Tehran

This Thursday the European Parliament office in London and University College London will jointly host a public discussion to celebrate the Sakharov Prize. One year after the death of Václav Havel, we are reflecting on his legacy for dissent today.

This year, the European Parliament honoured two Iranians, Jafar Panahi and Nasrin Sotoudeh, with the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, a prize whose first recipient was Nelson Mandela and that is the EU's equivalent to the Nobel Peace Prize. Panahi, a film director, has portrayed the lives of the marginalized and oppressed in contemporary Iran – women, children, the poor – with commitment and lack of sentimentality. Iranian authorities have construed this social criticism as a threat and have detained Panahi since March 2010. He is now serving a six-year prison sentence, banned from film-making or giving interviews for the next twenty years. Sotoudeh is a lawyer who has represented abused women and children as well as intellectuals and activists who have fallen foul of the Iranian regime. She too is now in prison, serving an eleven-year sentence and banned from leaving the country for twenty years. This artist and this lawyer are paying the price for their principled opposition to authority.

The alliance of law and the arts in resisting state violence is familiar to observers of Central and Eastern Europe. Back in 1977 in Czechoslovakia, a small group of intellectuals and ordinary citizens, of artists, philosophers, lawyers, economists, priests and workers, of environmentalists, liberals and Marxists, united to express their opposition to the actions of their government. This government had held its people in a repressive stranglehold since the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. Charter 77, as the group called itself, was formed specifically in response to two events. First, in 1975 the Czechoslovak government had signed the Helsinki Declaration on Human Rights. Charter 77 sought to hold the government to the standards that it had subscribed to and yet was flouting with its continued imprisonment of its citizens on political grounds. This was, then, a statement about legal norms. Second, Charter 77 responded to the arrest, trial, and banning from performance of the underground rock group, The Plastic People of the Universe. Charter 77 was equally about the right to challenge norms and to experiment socially and aesthetically.

Dissent in Czechoslovakia was born from these twin impulses: the arts and law, norm and experiment. From these impulses came a movement that, in the Velvet Revolution of 1989, played a central role in the overthrow of the European political order.

In the writings of Charter 77's spokesman, Václav Havel, who later became the leader of that revolution and then his country's president, dissent was defined the 'art of the impossible': the art of not accepting the *status quo* as the only state of affairs possible, despite all apparent evidence to the contrary. Through his own years of imprisonment, Havel practiced this art and kept his faith in radical political change, a faith that,

arguably, demanded the creative vision of a playwright more than the realism of a lawyer. Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe was not just about overthrowing a debased form of Communism. It was fundamentally about emancipatory modes of thought and action. This legacy has lost none of its relevance at a time when, as Slavoj Žižek has claimed, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Today we see dissent throughout the world: in Iran, but also in Putin's Russia and in Charter 08, the Chinese movement that explicitly models itself on its Czechoslovak forerunner, in the upheavals of the Arab Spring, in pro-democracy movements in Belarus, Burma and Bahrain. Here the arts often play a vital role, perhaps in Pussy Riot's punk prayer, but certainly in Ai Wei Wei's ludic yet politically trenchant artistic practice. We see dissent closer to home in Europe and the West too: in the Occupy movement, in anti-austerity movements in Greece and Spain, and in the growing conviction that—given the collapse of our economic system and the bankruptcy of our political system—there must be other ways of doing things.

The European Union does not only give out prizes to honour the courage of dissidents like Panahi and Sotoudeh. It now also receives prizes. We can all take some pride in, and even some credit for, the award of this year's Nobel Peace Prize to the EU. Yet the EU seems more comfortable with dissent when it happens beyond its own borders. Our task as ordinary Europeans is to resist this by drawing on the legacy of Havel: to demand justice as well as experiment, to dare to think and do the impossible.

Tim Beasley-Murray, Senior Lecturer in European Thought and Culture

Peter Zusi, Lecturer in Czech and Slovak Literature

School of Slavonic and East European Studies

University College London