

aspirations were irremediably democratic, insisting on the popular control of political power. Third, the revolution placed much of its emphasis on self-management and control from below, coupled with a multi-party system and parliamentary democracy, in which both individual and group freedoms could be secured. Finally, the revolution also placed Hungary's international neutrality on the agenda.

None of these makes comfortable reading for the holders of power in Hungary today. This is why the true message of 1956 cannot be rehabilitated or integrated into the Kádár system, regardless of the fact that that system has made the integration of uncomfortable experiences and individuals into itself one of its primary objectives. In reality, the Kádár system came into being over the dead body of the revolution and can never exorcise its memory. Except that that body is not quite as dead as it may have appeared once and the stirrings of life are beginning to revive the debate about the meaning of the thirty-year old revolution. After all, the Hungarian revolution was the first political revolution in an industrialised society; it was the revolution which recognised that a socialist order did not guarantee democracy as such and that democracy was an autonomous value which requires its own institutional framework to give it effect; and, with the Soviet invasion to suppress the revolution, it resulted in the first war between socialist states.

BETWEEN IDEALS AND UTOPIAS¹

A CONVERSATION WITH VÁCLAV HAVEL

Václav Havel:

I'd like to emphasize at the outset that I'm no political scientist, but a writer who observes and gathers impressions of the world around me. I trust that all I say from hereon will be viewed in that light. My impression is that there is an evident difference between dictatorships in the classical sense – what some describe as “authoritarian rule” – and totalitarianism. In the various dictatorships of the Third World, for instance, a small ruling group violently dominates and tyrannises society. Compared with those dictatorships, our totalitarian system is less openly or directly based on violence, even though it certainly rules society by means of an enormous police force, army and bureaucracy. Totalitarianism is unique in yet another sense. It is a system which absorbs the whole of society. It enters every vein and artery of the social organism, usurping and controlling all aspects of human life. Nazism is often cited as an example of totalitarianism, and I understand that the term was first used in connection with fascism in general. Yet fascism strikes me as a half way stage between dictatorship and totalitarianism as we experience it here. In order to distinguish our system from its “pre-historic” forms, I once employed the term “post-totalitarianism”. I tried to underline the fact that, although the Nazi and fascist states of the past were much more violent and brutal, they did not penetrate every area of life as thoroughly as our system does. Under fascist regimes, there were important spheres, such as people's private lives, in which people were able to do what they liked to a considerable degree, and which were seemingly untouched by the regime. In the system we live in, you won't normally encounter either street battles between citizens and the police or direct violence, brutality or terrorism from the regime. What one does encounter, however, is something that Orwell saw, and that is more dangerous in certain respects. Totalitarian regimes get under society's skin. Their complex forms of manipulation penetrate every sphere of life. I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that, from morning to night, every ordinary citizen in this country is faced with a situation in which everything they do is in some way interfered with by the system. The regime leaves its mark on everything, from the way housing estates are built to the patterns of television programming. You can even see this manipulation in apparently trivial things, such as the opening and closing times of restaurants, which are conceived with a view to discouraging people from sitting around too long, and encouraging them to get off home to their television screens to watch the messages broadcast by the centralised media.

¹ Published in 1986.

You say that totalitarian regimes are considerably less violent than military dictatorships. Many people in the west sense this difference, and consider it important. They might be inclined to say: "But compared with harsh and bloodthirsty dictatorships such as Pinochet's Chile, or governments of the South African kind, the type of regime you are describing is more civilised. At least it has some respect for human life. What would you say to this kind of remark?"

The failure to understand the totalitarian system, which such opinions reflect, is something that I personally don't hold against those who think this way. In fact I fully understand such opinions, because I have had every opportunity to appreciate that totalitarianism is something that one has to experience at first hand. It is something that is invisible at a distance. From a distance, one may see television images of Chilean policemen firing on demonstrators. They are visible and shocking, and anyone watching them can appreciate the brutality of the regime. Since your television does not transmit such images of massacres in Czechoslovakia or any other country in the Soviet bloc, our regimes inevitably appear more civilised. And indeed they are more civilised in this specific sense. Unhappily, there is also a sense in which they are more dangerous. In our system, the violence is spiritual rather than physical. In other words, hidden, covert. Life here seems pretty normal to outsiders. You can see people walking the streets, chatting happily, going shopping – superficially nothing seems wrong, and there are no signs of massacres. The violence of our system will never be seen by a tourist or visitor. It is the kind of violence they would see only if they got a job at CKD Engineering Works in Prague and had to travel to work every morning and back home every afternoon. They would then be in a position to understand what it means to earn the usual rate for the job there, and to be dependent on superiors. They would see how those who pursue political careers receive even higher salaries. They would discover that no matter how well they worked, their pay would remain the same. They would realise just how much they were at the mercy of the all-powerful bureaucracy, so that for every little thing they have to approach some official or other. They would observe the gradual destruction of the human spirit, of basic human dignity. They would be able to observe how, from the nursery to the old people's home, people live their lives in a state of permanent humiliation. These are features of the totalitarian system which can neither be filmed by television cameras nor easily explained to outsiders. In order to be seen they have to be experienced.

You've written a great deal about other aspects of this "invisible violence". For instance, you point to the paradoxical way in which the totalitarian system requires its subjects to be both victims of the system as well as its cynical and constantly moaning accomplices. You observed in a recent essay that never before has there existed a regime of this kind in which so many people are both supporters of the regime and – potentially at least – its opponents. What exactly do you mean by that?

Yes, I think that this paradox is very important, and typical of our type of advanced, latter-day totalitarianism. The fact is that the domination of a large group of powerless people by a small powerful group has long since ceased being its most typical feature. Nowadays, what is typical is the domination of one part of each of ourselves by another part of ourselves. It's as if the regime had an outpost inside every single citizen. Consequently, "the regime" is something that is elusive and hard to locate precisely within a particular institution or social group. In an odd kind of way, the system pervades the whole of society, such that everyone at the same time supports it and helps create it – by mutely acquiescing in its version of reality, by voting in formal elections, and by observing its various rituals and ceremonies. By

doing this, not only do people support the regime; they actually help create it. But at the same time everyone finds themselves in opposition...

Would you explain this point, perhaps with some examples?

I'll give you two specific examples of what I mean. As you can see, I'm in the process of having this flat adapted and reconstructed. The bricklayers and plumbers who come here are always moaning about "them" – the regime. They grumble almost constantly about the way things are. My second example is a deputy minister of state, that is, someone who presumably belongs to the ruling group of the state bureaucracy, and who might be regarded as one of "them" that everybody grumbles about. However, talk to this deputy minister in private and he'll say exactly the same thing as the bricklayers and plumbers. You'll find he also moans about the way things are, in fact more so because he is better informed about the situation. He'll complain about "them", yet it won't dawn on him that for most people he is one of "them". He'll complain that "they" won't let "us" do something or other, because "it's out of the question". He'll say things like "you know how things are". And if he happens to be an official working in the field of foreign trade, he will be very well informed about the enormous gap between productivity levels in the western and eastern economies. He'll set out an irrefutable case against "the system" based on countless facts, yet from early morning to four in the afternoon he sits in his office and performs his official government duties, thereby creating the very system against which he himself verbally rebels. This is something quite normal in this country. Absolutely everybody complains about the way things are. You can hear it in every pub and every household; in fact, you hardly ever meet anybody who would stick up for this regime in so many words. Everyone is fed up in one way or another, but their dissatisfaction finds no other expression and goes no further than this eternal bellyaching. People just go on doing what is required of them from morning to night. They adapt and compromise, thereby laying the foundations of the regime which they spend their time in attacking. This is what is most dangerous about totalitarianism, and why it differs from, say, the Chilean dictatorship. Our system invades every pore of society, and hence every citizen suffers from a type of "schizophrenia". This schizophrenia is extremely dangerous in the long term, since it not only destroys society, but also the identity, individuality and spirit of every member of society. [...]

Your western readers often express surprise that you refuse to identify uncritically with the image of the West as the bastion of freedom, openness and democracy. You seem to be suspicious of both western democracies and Soviet-type systems. Is this because you believe that these two systems, far from being fundamentally different, share something deeply in common?

It is seventeen years since I was last in the West. So in no way am I well qualified to pass critical judgement on Western political systems and ways of life. I really have little personal experience of them. Nonetheless, I can't help concluding from my own impressions and studies that the crisis in today's world is not just a matter of Soviet style totalitarianism. Its roots go deeper. I don't share the view of certain western politicians that Communism is some kind of painful ulcer in the world's stomach, and that all that is required is a surgical operation to put things right and make us all happy again. I don't think it's quite so simple.

Are you saying that totalitarian regimes such as Czechoslovakia are a possible shape of things to come in the West?

In my view, Soviet totalitarianism is an extreme manifestation – a strange, cruel and dangerous species – of a deep-seated problem which equally finds expression in advanced western society. These systems have in common something that the Czechoslovak philosopher Václav Bělohradský calls the “eschatology of the impersonal”, that is, a trend towards impersonal power and rule, by mega-machines or colossi that escape human control. I believe the world is losing its human dimension. Self-propelling mega-machines, juggernauts of impersonal power such as large-scale enterprises and faceless governments, represent the greatest threat to our present-day world. In the final analysis, totalitarianism is no more than an extreme expression of this threat. [...]

On several occasions you have written that the issue of capitalism or socialism is a dung of the past – a dead issue, an obsolete choice from the nineteenth century. Is this belief connected with your concern about the growth of impersonal, power-hungry organisations.

Yes, I believe that a century or so after Marx, the world is a very different place. The issue of whether firms are privately-owned or nationalised or “socially-owned” is no longer the basic question. What is more important is whether their scale is human or not. The way I see it, enormous companies like Shell or IBM are – fundamentally speaking – not very different from so-called socialist enterprises. Of course, these companies are more efficient and profitable and their productivity is higher. But they closely resemble big socialist firms in that both are colossal mega-machines from which the human dimension is increasingly lacking. Marx believed that the socialisation of the means of production would solve everything. I’m afraid I’m more of the view that even if they had been nationalised in a better and more intelligent fashion than in the Communist countries, it still wouldn’t solve the main problem which I feel to be more profound.

You have expressed regrets about the often bitter tussles in western Europe and North America to use your name and plays and essays for Rightist as well as Leftist purposes. Is this because you consider yourself in the centre of the political spectrum? Or are the categories of “Left” and “Right” no longer meaningful for you?

There are probably two reasons why I resist being assigned to either the Left or the Right. First, I have a sort of fundamental dislike of being categorised. Quite simply, I don’t like people laying claim on me and classifying me under some particular banner or other. I have no pretensions of always being correct, but I always try to make a conscientious effort to try to think things out as best I can. In my view, what matters is the truth rather than the particular sect, party or ideology to which I might be assigned. In a strange and subtle way, the very act of forming a political grouping forces one to start playing the power game, whereas I believe that truth has priority. So I refuse to identify with one particular political current or group because I would feel limited and obliged to correct my perception of the truth in line with group discipline. But there is probably a deeper motive.

The fact is that, in light of our experiences of totalitarianism, we don’t find that the traditional political spectrum, as it still exists in the West, expresses the fundamental issues. Looked at from over here it appears rather superficial. When I talk to someone on the right, I have the impression of being a left-winger. And when I talk with a left-winger, I feel as though I belong on the right. I really don’t know

where I belong, or how I can be classified in those terms. Actually, I don’t care, because those particular categories seem of secondary importance to me. What is important is whether a position corresponds to the truth – and not whether it’s left, right or centre. [...]

Throughout your writings you express severe reservations about utopian visions of “radiant tomorrows”, as you call them. Are you against utopianism because you feel that it is foreign to central Europe and its sceptical, sober, under-stated, slightly mysterious view of the world? Or are there deeper reasons?

For the sake of clarity, I would like to make a distinction between ideals and utopias. Ideals are things we strive for – things we consider good and desirable, and which we use as a measure of what is bad and undesirable. Or they can be things we deduce from our analysis of what is bad. While everyone – besides those who are totally indifferent – has ideals, they don’t necessarily believe in utopias. As I understand it, a utopia is a more or less rationalist attempt to think up an abstract better world, to conceive “on paper” how it should be organised. It is an attempt to produce a blueprint of the best possible system and then to try to put it into practice. In this country we have lived through the failure of one great utopia, and this has given us a very sceptical and critical view of utopianism in general [...]

So you reject utopias because they are instruments of deception – if you like, because they are elaborately constructed rainbows of shining ideas which tempt unhappy people into an even harsher reality?

The key point is that utopianism is a typically intellectual phenomenon – let us not forget that the greatest revolutionaries were all intellectuals. Utopianism is an arrogant attempt by human reason to plan life. But it is not possible to force life to conform to some abstract blueprint. Life is something unfathomable, ever-changing, mysterious, and every attempt to confine it within an artificial, abstract structure intended to make it function better somehow inevitably ends up homogenizing, regimenting, standardising and destroying life, as well as curtailing everything that projects beyond, overflows or falls outside the abstract project. In my view, there is a direct and logical progression from beautiful utopias to concentration camps. What is a concentration camp, after all, but an attempt by utopias to dispose of those elements which don’t fit into their utopias?

Lately, I believe that our world has seen some very telling examples of the failure of utopias, such as Pol Pot’s Cambodia. What was that but a cruel, extreme, tragic and terrifying example of what happens when intellectuals – Pol Pot studied in Paris – lose all respect for life’s richness and heterogeneity, for its immanence, for its own particular laws, when they choose to give arrogant credence to their own reason and their own ideas, which are supposed to be superior, more important and better than life itself, when these ideas are transformed into a doctrine and when, finally, they seek to implement that doctrine by making life conform to it? The outcome in Pol Pot’s case was that a third of the nation was murdered for quite irrational motives. Paradoxically, the fanaticism of the abstract theory leads inevitably to irrationality, because in the end the theory divorces itself from life and becomes an ideological “theorem” or abstract principle, in whose name innocent people are massacred. The disgust produced by such utopias is something that people living under totalitarian regimes probably feel more strongly than people living in free societies, precisely because they have personal experience of what it means when someone comes along with a beautiful utopian dream, proceeds to transform it into a detailed blueprint, at

which point they lose interest in life and are interested solely in putting their dream into practice, even if this means doing violence to life, or even destroying it.

My impression is that in practice the dividing line between ideals and utopias is often very thin. I also think that in today's world utopias of a certain kind seem to be as necessary as they are dangerous. For instance, without modestly "utopian" schemes for more political democracy and greater civil liberties and social justice we in the West would be condemned to accepting the status quo. And in totalitarian systems – as your fellow Chartist Milan Šimečka has pointed out – wouldn't a life without utopias be horrible? Wouldn't life be reduced to hopelessness, despair and resignation to the daily corruption and absurdity? Don't you engage in some modest utopian scheming – as in Letters to Olga where you speak of the need for an "existential revolution", for the strengthening of human qualities such as love, sympathy, tolerance, understanding, solidarity and friendship?

From time to time I'm asked: "Well, isn't what you are striving for 'utopian'?" My answer is that one must distinguish between, on the one hand, a state of permanent openness towards mysteriously changing and always rather elusive and never quite attainable ideals such as truth and morality and, on the other, an unequivocal identification with a detailed plan for implementing those ideals which in the end becomes self-justifying. I truly believe – and this is somehow missing from Šimečka's article about utopias – that there is a difference between striving for particular ideals, and creating a blueprint for implementing them. You're right, there would seem to be a fine line between the two, an almost imperceptible shift when ideals stop being ideals and turn into utopias. But this shift nevertheless occurs when we stop being aware of an ideal as such and when we give that ideal concrete form and substance, and we suddenly find that instead of believing in a particular ideal, we end up only believing in the utopia, in other words, in the concrete plan for implementing that ideal. This subtle, but crucial and dangerous shift occurs when the head takes over from the heart, when spiritual motivations are suddenly supplanted by an "object" or "thing". A utopia is really a "thing" – the materialisation of an ideal – and it is obviously easier and more convenient to deal with this "thing" than with something so intangible and mysterious as ideals. At the same time, it is more dangerous, because the moment that we put all our faith and trust in a specific project for implementing them, we lose touch with the ideals themselves. The ideals are replaced by our specific blueprint, our doctrine, our ideology – and therein lie the roots of disaster [...]

I understand that as a playwright you've never been interested in a political career. But, against your will, you've been dragged into politics. You participated in the dramatic events of the Prague Spring – on one occasion, I believe that you even "counselled" Alexander Dubček for several hours on how Czechoslovakia ought to be run. More recently, you've described this period of reform communism as a dreadful hotch-potch that neither satisfied the Czechoslovak public nor the Kremlin. Would you elaborate this point?

1968 was not merely a clash between two factions of political leaders and a temporary victory of the more liberal faction, I regard it as the logical outcome of a lengthy process whereby society gradually achieved "self-awareness and self-emancipation". Everyone, including myself, was quite euphoric about what was happening. After all, we started to breathe freely and we were free to meet. Fear dissipated, various taboos fell away, and all sorts of social conflicts and interests could be voiced out loud. The media were once again able to play their proper role and civic awareness grew apace. Quite simply, the ice started to thaw and the windows began to

be opened. However, my joy was also mixed with feelings of uncertainty, which plagued me and many others more and more....

What provoked your worries?

In my particular case, it was the realisation of just how embarrassing these developments were to the state leadership. All of a sudden, they enjoyed general support and spontaneous sympathy, something they had never known before, since they were accustomed to support organised from above. While they sympathised with the social groundswell, they also feared it. They relied on it without understanding it completely; and they welcomed it while all along trying to hold it in check. In other words, they wanted to ventilate the country but were frightened of fresh air – a factor that I think was generously ignored by the national euphoria I mentioned. As a consequence, the political leadership tended to do no more than trot along in the wake of events, instead of guiding and protecting society. Trapped by their illusions, they kept on telling themselves that they would somehow manage to explain it convincingly to the Soviets in private; that they would manage to keep society on a leash; and that, in the end, the Soviets would have to understand the situation and give their consent. As a result, they concealed their differences with the Soviets, failed to heed the warning signals, and succumbed to the illusion that they would somehow cope with the developments. The hastily produced Action Programme of April 1968 mirrored all these contradictions. Essentially, it was a hotch-potch of different contradictions capable of satisfying neither Czechoslovak society nor the Kremlin. [...]

You say in your writings that you favour a type of "anti-politics" – similar to that pursued by Charter 77 since its inception – as a remedy for impersonal, manipulative power. This term anti-politics sounds strange to Western ears. Would you explain briefly what you mean by it?

My impression is that people take this term too seriously, as if it described some ideologic category or weighty thesis. When I first used the term it was no more than a handy expression in a particular situation. It was a way of trying to say succinctly that under totalitarian conditions – though not confined to them alone – an action that has no ambitions of political power can have surprisingly political effects, the significance of which are long term and greater than the effects of so-called "political" actions within the realms of power. Since you mentioned Charter 77, I could use it to illustrate what I mean. The Charter is made up of a small number of citizens – few in terms of society as a whole – who have no weapons, no bureaucracy, no mass political party, no power ambitions, no desire to take over the government and who therefore would seem to be insignificant from the point of view of "Realpolitik" or administrative politics. But the fact is that the Charter has an influence far in excess of the number of its signatories or supporters. It manages to influence the entire sphere of social consciousness which, normally speaking, is prey to manipulation by the regime. The Charter has a sort of electrifying effect, which charges its surroundings and in turn becomes a political factor. The enormous campaign unleashed by the regime against the Charter at the time of its creation, and the millions of crowns spent since then on fighting and trying to suppress it, could not possibly be explained without acknowledging the political impact of what was seemingly a "non-political" action. In an essay, "Politics and Conscience", I tried to examine this idea of anti-politics in a broader context. I tried, if you like, to sketch out an ideal sort of politics whose determining factor is people's conscience, in other words, a type of practical morality governed by certain basic existential and ethical

imperatives. That essay grew out of our experiences here and I'd hate it to be mistaken for some kind of doctrine. It was nothing of the sort, but rather an attempt to describe a phenomenon which observers from outside sometimes have difficulty in understanding ...

They do indeed. For instance, many western politicians responsible for directing foreign policy towards eastern Europe seem to regard this small-scale moral activity in the shadows of the state as "unrealistic", as fantastic as the Lilliputians' attempts to tie down Gulliver from below by thousands of small threads. How do you react to such criticism?

I sometimes get the feeling that something that appears unrealistic can turn out to be the most realistic in the end. Many people in the West expect the Charter to be an independent peace movement, an ecological movement, a substitute for public opinion, a source of publishing activity, and a partner for social democratic or conservative political parties. The Charter is treated sometimes as though we were some alternative, second Czechoslovakian government. We are burdened with various political roles which in the West are borne by scores or hundreds of different organisations and institutions. A handful of Prague stokers and caretakers, who are members of the Charter, are required in the little spare time they have to assume all these different political roles. How would all the "realist" politicians you mentioned reply to the questions: How is it that these unrealistic idealists, these dreamers who are apparently incapable of influencing real politics, are obliged to spend their time from morning to night in talks with foreign visitors? Why are they regarded by different diplomatic delegations to Czechoslovakia as the only partner worth speaking to in this country apart from the government? How did they achieve this power, when there are so few of them, and when they are such idealists? [...]

During the 1980s, you've contributed actively to the dialogue between Charter 77 and the western peace movement. In your essay, The Anatomy of a Reticence, you try to explain to western peace activists why the issue of "peace" arouses suspicion and hostility among most people in central-eastern Europe. Some people in the peace movement – and many of their critics as well – saw your essay as an attack on the movement, as something like an attempt to pour cold water on its dreams of a trans-European peace movement capable of questioning and challenging the post-war division of Europe. Did you intend your essay to be understood in this way?

Charter 77 came into being as a human rights campaign, and not as an independent peace movement. But since in Czechoslovakia the Charter was the best known community of people acting independently and trying to voice the truth, it gradually became the "natural partner" of the western peace movement in its efforts to engage in a dialogue with fellow-citizens in our half of Europe, rather than with the state-run peace committees. We don't have any independent peace movement here, so I think it was only inevitable that this dialogue happened. After all, since its creation, the Charter has followed a general policy of openness to dialogue with anyone. It offers dialogue with the governing circles of this country, as well as with anyone ready to take part in sincere and serious debate. But dialogue doesn't imply that we abandon our views in favour of simple acceptance by our western partners or as a means of obtaining allies. Such an approach would be a denial of the Charter's very aims. All the Charter seeks to do is to explain truthfully how we view the issues, not in order to be controversial but, on the contrary, always with the desire of meeting our partners half-way. If people don't want to talk to us, that is their business. But we will never close the door on anyone and we'll always try, however different our views may be, to explain our position and seek common ground. It was

in this spirit that I wrote Anatomy of a Reticence. It's likely that a lot of what I said doesn't please many western peace activists. But I wrote it as an offering, that is, as if I was explaining my uncomfortable opinions to a friend or colleague in the expectation that they will respond by explaining their views to me. A dialogue should ideally be an ongoing process. I didn't mean to imply that the outcome must be a single European peace movement, or a world peace movement. That would be utopian. It would be unnatural, because it takes all sorts to make a world, and because there is no way that everyone could be united in a single, all-embracing organisation. I think the dialogue we've had has been beneficial to both sides, and I could cite many specific cases where it has had positive results. The western peace movement has undergone a certain evolution in recent years, and this surely has been assisted to an extent by its dialogue not only with Charter 77 but also with other groups in our half of Europe. It displays a growing awareness of the connection between human rights and peace, which I regard as a positive development.

Environmental images are prominent in several of your writings... How sympathetic are you to the style and themes of what is known in the West as "green politics"?

I am not fully enough informed about the specific policies of the green parties or ecological movements in various countries to be able to analyse or comment on them in any informed or competent fashion. Nor, for the same reason, can I come out in their favour or reject them. Nevertheless, from the little I know, I have the feeling that in so far as they call attention to the underlying problems of present-day civilisation, the green movements seem, here and there, to have brought to the surface issues which have been neglected or downplayed by the major traditional political parties. These issues concern the meaning of life, such as whether there is any reason in the constant drive for increased production when it is to the detriment of future generations. I must say that this entire trend, as well as these movements' proclaimed non-ideological stance and their advocacy of non-violence, are things close to my own heart and way of thinking. I can't judge whether the proclaimed principles of these movements are actually applied. And I am aware that they are young movements, which means that they are often very chaotic, confused and naive, and possibly forced to go through all the usual childish afflictions. Yet I can well imagine them throwing the established political scene in western countries into disarray.

In western Europe, the Chernobyl accident has given some impetus to these movements. It has also increased the level of public uncertainty about governments' deep commitment to nuclear power. Even the nuclear industry itself has seemed less sure of its step. I'm curious about the response to the Chernobyl accident in Czechoslovakia, how did society react?

In a country where there exist no public opinion research and no free press, it's only possible to talk about "public opinion" with a degree of poetic license. But as far as I could judge, there was, on the one hand, quite an angry reaction among people. This anger was unusually powerful, considering that there has not been a tradition of ecological concern here in past decades, at least not officially. However, the anger was not great enough to give rise to public protest or for it to overstep the bounds of private discontent. The other type of reaction took the form of various Chernobyl jokes in the tradition of Czech humour. At the time, many western visitors were horrified that we were capable of making a lot of sick jokes of the "gallows humour" variety, but this is a typical, self-preservation mechanism of our society when it is threatened in some way.

Western opponents of nuclear power usually view the Chernobyl accident as a particular example of the general dangers of "going nuclear". Rarely do they link the accident with the peculiar features of the Soviet political system. Do you think Chernobyl tells us something about this type of system?

The Chernobyl disaster was the outcome of our sort of social system. While there has yet to be a complete explanation in the Soviet Union of the experiment that culminated in the accident, there are good reasons for suspecting that there were military circles involved in carrying out arms experiments at the plant concerning how it would function in the event of emergency or loss of energy. That's only speculation, and there are many other possible explanations of the accident. But Chernobyl is a very ominous warning about how this very special kind of lackadaisical, bureaucratic and socialist management of every sector of economic activity, including the production of nuclear energy, can have disastrous results. All that is necessary is the abdication of responsibility – a phenomenon which is endemic to this system. That's one aspect in which Chernobyl highlights the peculiarity of our system. Another aspect concerns the centralising effect of nuclear power. I have to admit that I don't have any clear-cut opinion on whether or not to continue with nuclear power. But one argument against nuclear power that appeals most to me – it's not one that is directly ecological – is that nuclear power has a tendency to encourage centralisation and state control. My friends, including Milan Horáček, who is a Bundestag member of the West German Green Party, drew my attention to this problem. Nuclear power is inevitably an enormously complex business with a lot of subsidiary branches dependent on it. It promotes a centralised administration and as we know from experience, those who control sources of energy wield tremendous power. As I said earlier, I tend to favour decentralisation and pluralist solutions, not only in political but also in economic matters. What terrifies me about nuclear power stations is their centralising aspect, which is why I am opposed to nuclear power in the hands of irresponsible bureaucrats, as is the case in totalitarian regimes.

We've been talking about various aspects of anti-politics, as well as its chances of successfully bringing about changes in State policies. This raises the issue – a very central one in Poland today – of whether totalitarian regimes are capable of peaceful compromise with their domestic opponents and, in particular, whether the strategy of anti-politics will be helped or hindered by the so-called "Gorbachev course". Gorbachev has impressed many people in the West with his different style of leadership. Sometimes I even have the impression that some people think, or hope, that he will turn out to be something like a Russian Kennedy. How significant is the so-called "Gorbachev course" for Czechoslovakia? Or is this course likely to be blocked by hard-line Party forces? Do you think the "Gorbachev course" is actually nothing new?

I have to admit that as far as Mr Gorbachev is concerned, I am neither an optimist or a pessimist. I quite simply have no opinion either way. I'll just wait and see what his era brings. He's not been in power long enough for us to be able to draw any definite conclusions. In principle, I don't exclude the possibility of a more enlightened man assuming power in the Soviet Union and carrying out reforms and humanising the system gradually. So far there is not enough evidence to indicate that Gorbachev is that man. Concerning his popularity in the West, I am rather shocked to find that the so-called "realist" politicians who mock us for our lack of realism allow themselves to be charmed by a few seductive lances in their direction from a gentleman who – as was evident to me after the first five minutes of watching him on television – was playing to the cameras. The fact that all those worldly-wise, long-serving "realist" politicians, who mock us naive dreamers fighting for human rights in eastern Europe,

are unable to see through it is something I find alarming. I have to admit that I find it more terrifying than the prospect of a few more Pershing rockets aimed in our direction. [...]

You are often asked by western visitors, "What can we do to help your situation?" You have written that although this question is well meaning and indicates an attempt to understand your situation, it nevertheless contains a built-in misunderstanding. What did you mean by that quite surprising answer?

I didn't mean my words to be taken quite that literally. I wanted to explain a particular idea of mine. I tried to stress that when our friends in the West help us, it's not just a matter of humanitarian assistance or charitable action – a case of the better off helping someone in difficulties. Rather, these acts of solidarity should derive from a realisation – as indeed I think is happening more and more – that our destinies are linked and indivisible, and that in helping us, people in the West are also helping themselves. In today's world our destinies are so bound up together that if one of us becomes caught in some sort of misfortune, everyone else is drawn willy nilly into that same misfortune. This is certainly true in Europe. I believe that the problems facing western Europe today cannot be solved unless the problems facing eastern Europe are also solved. That is why the solidarity extended to us by people in western Europe is not for our benefit alone. It is for their benefit as well.