

MILAN KUNDERA AND THE STRUGGLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL



ROBERT THOMAS

In the aftermath of the Second World War the novelist Milan Kundera was a supporter of the Czech Communist party which seized power in 1948. The failure of Milan Kundera's writings to conform to the model of "Socialist Realism", however, soon led to his expulsion from the Communist Party. In August 1968, when Warsaw Pact forces moved in to crush the Prague Spring, he was removed from his teaching post at the Prague Film School and his novels were banned. In 1975 Kundera left Czechoslovakia to live in France.

This political background is crucial to Kundera's work. The characters in his novels are engaged in a struggle to assert themselves against the unfeeling nature of the political state. Kundera has himself, however, been keen to play down the 'political' nature of the novels. When in 1980 Kundera heard his novel *The Joke* described as a "major indictment of Stalinism" he quickly contradicted this stating: "Spare me your Stalinism. *The Joke* is a love story." However both statements are true, for the struggle of the individual against the political collective is complemented by the individual's struggle to assert him or herself in the personal sphere. The public and the private move together and interweave until they are inseparable. If in Kundera's

novels the individual living in truth is contrasted with the falseness of the collective then the principle of choice between these two powers is always at the forefront of his work. For him the individual is not simply the subject of historical forces but the arbiter and motor of history.

THE INDIVIDUAL REBELS

Kundera appreciated from bitter experience that the individual could suffer for choices made. The collective would not be tolerant of he who mocked its authority. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Mirek suffers imprisonment when he chooses to oppose the government. Similarly Tomas (the protagonist of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) loses his job as a doctor and is forced to work as a window cleaner when he refuses to withdraw an article critical of the Communist authorities. While these characters suffer for their actions there is a sense in which they attain an individual triumph. They have chosen life rather than "to become a shadow" in the service of collectivism.

A clear contrast to this may be seen in the barrenness of those characters who have forsaken their individual lives for the worship of an abstract collectivism. Representative of this is the way in which Zdena, having failed in her relationship with Mirek, can shed copious tears for deceased Soviet statesmen she has never met.

THE MIND OF A CHILD

In Kundera's work the collectivist/pack/crowd mentality is frequently represented by images involving children. This is a correct diagnosis. Collectivism involves a longing to attain a childlike state of security without responsibility or choice. It is a state which Kundera described as the "joyful solidarity of the soulless". In a surreal sequence in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* the character Tamina finds herself to be the only adult stranded on an island of children. The children at first adulate her and then revile and persecute her. Her fate is that of the individual faced by the collective in society.

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Robert Thomas graduated in Archeology and Medieval History at Sheffield University, and is now doing an M.Phil in Medieval History.

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



The use of children as an image of totalitarianism has a literal accuracy, as it has always been the youth movements who have stood in the vanguard of revolutionary struggle whether these movements be the Soviet Pioneers, the Hitler Youth, the child killers of the Khmer Rouge or the young 'Comrades' of the South African townships.

The image also has a non-literal ironic meaning. The revolutionary/collectivist is represented as an 'innocent' child, and the organic solidarity of the collectivist is represented by Kundera as a children's game or "Circle Dance". But behind this facade of innocence lies evil, as he who does not join in the unity of the dance and does not appreciate the "peculiar magic qualities of the circle" is condemned to be destroyed in spirit or even in body.

PLAYING AT TOTALITARIANISM

In Kundera's novels there are frequent occurrences of people 'playing' at roles alien to their true characters. In the short story entitled *The Hitch Hiking Game*, from the collection *Laughable Loves*, two young lovers on holiday pretend to be strangers as part of a 'game'. The game, however, assumes a life of its own and alters the relationship which exists between them in reality. In *The Joke* it is Ludvik's attempt to conduct his relationship with Lucie according to other people's ideals rather than his own individual understanding of her which destroys the love which was between them.

These examples of personal 'play acting' can be seen to be mirrored by the way in which Kundera sees totalitarianism as a game which gets out of control and unwittingly becomes real. The Prague Spring, he states, was an attempt at 'stalking a lost deed'. An attempt to reverse the consequences of the game the young radicals of the 1940s and 1950s had played.

BEYOND COMMUNISM TO COLLECTIVISM

There can be no doubt that Kundera is opposed to Communism, which he saw as a force engaged in the extirpation of his nation's identity. Beneath this opposition, however, was a belief that Communism was but a surface manifestation of a deeper conflict between individuality and collectivism. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the character Sabina articulates this understanding of the depth of collectivism when she states that:

Behind Fascism, Communism, behind all the occupations and invasions lurks a more basic pervasive evil and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison.

Sabina recognises a similar spirit of collectivism in some of the anti-Communist exiles she encounters. For her the leader of the anti-Communist exiles is the spitting image of Novotny, the Czech puppet of the Soviets!

There is also a recognition that paradoxically, in resisting collectivism, the individual succumbs to a different expression of the collective.

It is said of Tereza, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, that during the Prague Spring:

She enjoyed a few happy nights. The Russians brought equilibrium to her in their tanks.

For Kundera the failure of the Prague Spring proved the fragility not only of an individual destiny but also of an

entire nation in the face of collective force. He recalls how after the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century, the Jesuits attempted a similar erasing of the Czech identity. Where that attempt failed he feared that the Soviet attempt would triumph. The Prague Spring proved to him that the nation was a fragile thing in the face of the collective but that the individual would endure against all the deprivations of collectivism. It is in individuals therefore that the core of resistance lies.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the two female protagonists, Sabina and Tereza, are both attached to material symbols of individuality. For Tereza her material symbols are books while for Sabina the object is a bowler hat formerly belonging to her father. The books represent for Tereza a spirit of learning and sophistication rising above the collective. For Sabina the bowler hat is a connection with a past uncontrolled by the party or the state. For Kundera, if the world had hope it lay in the struggle of the individual for freedom.

THE NEW DAWN

In the author's preface to the novel *The Joke* Kundera wrote:

Some day Russian mythographers will write about it [the Russian Invasion] as a new dawn of history. I see it (rightly or wrongly) as the beginning of Europe's end.

Today such pessimism appears unwarranted as the revolution of 1989 has swept away the Communist Collectivist order in Czechoslovakia. In many ways, however, Kundera observed in the oppressed Czech society the ingredients of the revolution which was to come. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Kundera notes that "In my sweet strange country poets still exercise a charm over the hearts of women." It is a fitting observation for a country whose national uprising was led by writers and whose president is a playwright.

In the short story entitled *Edward and God*, part of the anthology *Laughable Loves*, it is asked of one character whose father has been persecuted by the Communists:

But how should she show her hatred [of the Communists]? Perhaps by taking a knife and avenging her father? But this was not the custom in Bohemia.

Indeed it is not - hence the bloodless nature of the recent Czechoslovakian revolution.

It might appear that a new dawn of individualism has indeed appeared. But Kundera's work reminds us that collectivism does not arise out of mere political structures but lurks in the human psyche. The collectivist hydra has many heads - of which communism is only one.

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