

J. Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012.

In his account of the 1989 revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, Timothy Garton Ash drew attention to the function of myth and theatrical convention—what he called ‘the magic of round numbers’—in the narrative framing of the Velvet Revolution.¹

Harvard professor Jonathan Bolton’s recent book, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech culture under Communism* (HUP, 2012) returns to this question in what Padraic Kenney calls ‘one of the first truly post-communist, post-commemorative histories of communist Central Europe.’ Bolton’s work is a careful and nuanced critical deconstruction of the clichéd metanarrative of dissent and a real contribution to the understanding of this period, with implications for the understanding of dissent in other contexts. The book does not so much debunk the foundation myths of dissent (and to a much lesser extent the Underground) as it simply draws attention to, and critically examines the bunk. His consideration of first person texts complicates and grounds the fairy tale version of Czech dissent in the everyday practices, frustrations, and self-contradictions of non-conformist activity under Normalization.

Bolton’s thesis is that dissident communities were conjured and sustained by the stories they told themselves about themselves, and contrasts this with the predominant narratives of dissidence, from the universalism of the Helsinki effect, to the communitarianism of civil society, to the grey zone of the everyday. His use of fresh primary sources including letters (open and private), diaries, and interviews, effectively humanizes and complicates the dissidents themselves, and by extension, *dissidence* itself, and supports his main thesis, drawing attention to the dialogic underpinnings of dissent. It is a refreshing and provocative look at a disarmingly familiar story.

But Kenney is also accurate in an ironic way. As Havel characterized *post*-totalitarianism not as the end of totalitarianism but its genetic refinement; its insinuation into the micro-practices of everyday life, Bolton’s book is *post*-commemorative in the same way: it replicates, in form if not content, the same reading of dissent that he criticizes. The usual suspects (Havel & company) hold center stage and command the bulk of his attention while

¹ ‘I said: “In Poland it took ten years, in Hungary ten months, in East Germany ten weeks: perhaps in Czechoslovakia it will take ten days!” ...And when I finally had to leave Prague on Day Nineteen, with the revolution by no means over, people were still saying, “You see, with us—ten days!” Such is the magic of round numbers.’

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those whose stories complicate the metanarrative of dissent (the Underground, non-signatories, women, the “ordinary people,” etc.) are mostly left in the wings. For example, near the end of the book he describes Eva Kanturkova’s *Sesly jsme se v teto knize* [‘We have gathered together in this book’] in passing as ‘one of the most interesting and underappreciated documents of dissent’ (263), but only devotes a paragraph to it, and only by way of illuminating Vaculik’s more familiar *Czech Dream Book*, which is the subject of the entire chapter. Drawing attention to the presence of other voices within the myth of dissent is certainly an important contribution, though he never fully allows them to speak.

This is particularly true in his treatment of the Underground. The title of the book suggests that the *Plastic People*, like the Charter, was simply another world of dissent, when a serious consideration of their aesthetic might suggest they had other interests and priorities than the Chartists. Bolton’s interest, if not sympathy, is most clearly with the latter, though perhaps only because of his disciplinary perspective. As a linguist and literary scholar rather than an ethnographer, (oral) historian, or area specialist, the literary culture of the dissidents lends itself more to his preferred methodology of close reading and textual analysis. The Underground, as primarily a musical, performative and oral culture, gets shorter shrift. His discussion of the PPU for example, makes no mention of the music that was the catalyst and glue of the subculture, their performances and happenings, or even lyrics, except as poetry. Despite their equal billing in the title, the *Plastic People of the Universe* only make a brief appearance, and the dissidents maintain their privileged position. The one chapter dedicated to the ‘Legends of the Underground’ starts with a brief overview of the history of the PPU, but then switches to an extended discussion of Bondy’s novel *Invalid Siblings*, which turns the actual figures of the Underground into literary characters. Halfway through the chapter, Bolton abruptly reverts to a discussion of the Charter. The Underground does rear its head from time to time throughout the book, though usually as a counterpoint to clarify particular aspects of the strictly dissident world.

Bolton does mention several key contributions of the Underground to dissent; functioning as an ‘empty signifier’ around which other constituents of dissent could gather; the critique of consumerist society; the political force of pre-political behavior (which Havel slyly calls ‘antipolitical politics’, rather than ‘antipolitics’, an important distinction); and especially the way the Underground provided a model of the ‘ways in which a community partially defines itself through legends and mythmaking’ (142). The title of chapter 4 ‘Legends of the Underground’ is clever, referring not only to the legendary individuals

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(especially Jirous and Bondy)—not to mention the annoying prefix that has attached itself to the PPU—but the actual legends/myths/stories that constituted them as such.

Greater attention to the contributions of the Underground to the history of Normalization is most welcome, and Bolton's demythification is especially needed here. His etymology of the meme 'Trial of the Plastic People' (115–18) –like the section on framing of the death of Jan Patočka—is one of the most concise and effective illustrations of his thesis and method in the book). But he does not treat the Underground in a sustained, comparative way, or with the same care and respect as his analysis of the Charter. He does spend some time on the canonical *texts* of the underground, such as Jirous's *Report on the Third Czech Music Revival*, and Bondy's *Invalidni sourozenci*, but he does not subject them to the same level of analysis as the dissident texts, perhaps because he lacks the supplemental written material that was the main mode of discourse among the dissidents and his preferred methodology. This oversight is a shame though possibly—the title notwithstanding—outside the realm of Bolton's project.

Nevertheless, one of Bolton's great insights is the way both the dissidents and the Underground constituted themselves as a *res publica* through discourse. In their own way, both were engaged in a Habermasian project to reconquer the public sphere and reconstitute civil society (or in the case of the Underground, really to constitute a *parallel* public sphere or 'second culture') that had been flattened by the policies of Normalization. Bolton glosses over the important difference that the Underground was never a political project whereas the dissidents saw its independent activities as naively engaged in a civil service (one of the many reasons Jirous declined to be Minister of Culture after the revolution) but his theoretical insight and refinement is a promising analytical opening.

It is this thesis of the importance of dialogue, storytelling, mythmaking and framing to identity, community, and the constitution of the public sphere that should make the book most interesting to oral historians, despite Bolton's privileging of written texts. Treating dissident writing as equivalent to public discourse is a bit of a stretch, especially considering their limited circulation, though Bolton makes a good case, describing Vaculik's *Czech Dream Book* as 'transpos(ing) the oral legends of the underground—built around concerts, recitations, and other face-to-face performances—into the writing based culture of dissent—built around considered and well crafted responses to reproducible texts' (261) and INFOCH reports as '...not just announcements, they were stories' (198). He also analyzes Hejdanek's *Letters to a Friend* to illustrate how conversations read as text could function as a 'for self-

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constituting discourse' (191) While the mode of address was mainly literary and polemical in dissident circles and oral, musical, and performative in the Underground, Bolton carefully and convincingly illustrates how both groups used their respective mediums to build and engage their community.

He cites Habermas' idea of the literary public sphere as a basis for civil society and usefully supplements it with Michael Warner's work on publics and counterpublics (208). There is a leap of faith in treating text as equivalent to the 'open interaction, a mode of "public address"' (208), especially as Bolton tends to revert to textual analysis to make his case, but his nuanced treatment of the 'open letter' as a rhetorical strategy aimed at an imagined community, and his framing of the Charter's significance less as an ideological statement than a narrative framework for the discourse of dissent; enabling the creation of a community structured by its interaction with a common text, is convincing. Even more supportive of his thesis, is his cogent analysis of the state media campaign against the Charter, which invoked the outraged voices of workers and other 'ordinary people' in editorials, letters, and petitions to reclaim the (rhetorical) public sphere. Bolton's description of the regimes of Normalization and dissent not as social institutions or actors, but as sets of disciplinary practices (suggesting Foucault, who might have completed the theoretical trifecta) is a refreshing and generative approach. This theoretical insight is also a tidy explanation for the threat posed by the relatively small dissident group and the relatively apolitical underground. Though Bolton doesn't highlight it in his discussion of *Power of the Powerless*, Havel suggests as much in his description of the greengrocer as disrupting the *diktat* of the ruling semiocracy. Accordingly, the regime's description of the Chartists as 'usurpers' [*samozvanci*] finally makes more rhetorical than political sense, because they were trying to take over what the regime saw as its prerogative in constituting the socialist public through their monopoly on communication. This is a case where Bolton's disciplinary insight as a scholar of languages and literature opens up a fresh field of analysis for the rest of us.

This is a useful, thoughtful and well written book that makes real contributions to understanding the complexity and groundedness of dissent under the conditions of Normalization. His careful attention to historical context, mythmaking (both among the dissidents and their western interpreters), and the structuring conventions of literary and rhetorical form is most welcome. Above all, his attention to the practice of dissent over its institutionalization (its *parole* over its *langue*) is liberating. His consideration of the tedious

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technicalities and practicalities of samizdat in chapter 3, for example, ground and preclude any simplistic, ideological reading of the significance of samizdat texts per say.

Yet, while his critical insight calls for more variety and inclusion in understanding the history of the Czech ‘worlds of dissent’, the structure and frame of the book, with its privileging of canonical Chartist texts and marginalization of other voices, actually replicates the usual reading of the dissident hero myth and contradicts his own thesis. Perhaps this is an unavoidable irony given his focus and methodology, but a serious consideration of the Underground aesthetic/strategy of radical autonomy suggests another approach. Maybe, as Ivan Jirous, Jan Zabraná, Theodor Adorno, and John Cage have suggested, critically engaging the metanarrative in the end just reifies it. Perhaps it would be more generative of new scholarly insight on the period to ignore the metanarrative altogether (imagine a book on Normalization that does not mention the dissidents at all!) or at least get some sociological perspective on the phenomenon. The dissidents appear marginal at best, for example, in the groundbreaking oral history research of daily life under socialism conducted by Miroslav Vanek and the Center for Oral History, Prague. The detail and precision of Bolton’s close reading—perhaps like the insular micropractices of the dissidents themselves—can only be achieved by sacrificing some depth of field.

In the end, one of the book’s main contributions is theoretical rather than substantive. Bolton has hit reset, opened the door, and provided a fresh theory and a set of analytical tools for many further studies on Normalization and dissent, not only in Czechoslovakia, but anywhere that power is confronted by powerlessness (and vice versa). He concludes with a specific critique of the historiography of Czech dissent: too Prague centered; too secular; too Chartist; too male; too focused on the heroes, and too limited by translations. He has archeologically uncovered the layering of meaning and its conflation into myth, not only in dissidence—and to a lesser extent in the Underground—but also in the academic community. In doing so, in undermining the ideological rigidity of scholarly understandings of the period, he has restored the humanity and possibility to the story.

As they say in the academy: we’ve successfully problematized the issue, now let’s move on.

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