

Lavinia Stan: The Unbearable Lightness of Being an Eastern European Intellectual

John Keane: *Vaclav Havel. A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999, 532 pp., hardback £25.00.

Vladimir Tismaneanu: *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism and Myth in Post-Communist Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, 216 pp., \$31.95.

The literature concerned with intellectuals and their role in society acquired a new lease of life with the sudden collapse of Eastern European communism, seen by Timothy Garton Ash and many others after him as the direct result of the intellectuals' daring challenge to a constricting totalitarian political regime. Following the 1989 revolutions the anti-communist intellectuals seemed to have found a new place for themselves, and a new loyal audience. To the West, where apparently consumerism and materialism had increasingly marginalized critical inquiry on issues of common interest, and thinkers in turn took refuge in academic ivory towers inaccessible to mere mortals, the Eastern European dissidents were teaching the value of intellectual endeavour and active political engagement for the benefit of the wider society. For the sake of their fellow countrymen, they were ready to assume the role of enlightened philosopher-kings guiding the people through the intricate process of making peace after a tortuous past and building a democratic, prosperous future. Although ten years later there is widespread disappointment with the fact that neither of the two expectations has been met, Eastern European intellectuals continue to be revered as genuine symbols of freedom, heroes of democracy and beacons of morality.

Both books under review speak eloquently about the place of critical intellectuals in post-communist times, although each approaches the issue from a different perspective and with different tools. Whereas one chooses to scrutinize chronologically the life of a well-known dissident-turned-president, the other adopts a comparative perspective resting on a thematic rather than case-by-case or country-by-country framework. While one book draws on a wealth of new data to present the moral growth, intellectual development and political involvement of a single dissident, the second juxtaposes the discourse of a number of Eastern European critical intellectuals to less accommodating visions of the society proposed by enemies of Enlightenment values. One author explicitly sets out to offer a candid portrait of the extraordinary accomplishments, and all too human frailty, of Vaclav Havel. By contrast, the other author, himself an Eastern European intellectual who emigrated to North America from Romania in the early 1980s, adopts a more deferential

stand, seemingly succumbing to one of the very myths he so skilfully analyses: that of the dissident as national redeemer. Ultimately, the two authors offer opposing answers to the important question of whether the intellectuals could bring some morality to a political process dominated by corruption, cynicism and greed. For John Keane the honeymoon with the intellectuals of the East is over, since as political actors they cast away all pretence of high morality and disinterested pursuit of the community's well-being, embracing instead the unsavoury characteristics of any politician, from manipulation and conceit, to arrogance and aloofness. Not so for Vladimir Tismaneanu, on the other hand, who reminds us that free thinkers were those who in the 1970s and the 1980s put forth the concept of civil society, central not only to the collapse of communist regimes but also to the building of the new democratic societies. As he concludes, 'the politics of post-communism still needs these people if civil society in its real sense, as an area of autonomy that allows the individual to control rather than to escape the state bureaucracy, is to be constructed' (p. 146).

A well-established British political thinker, John Keane is a newcomer neither to the biographical genre, in which he previously engaged with considerable skill in his acclaimed account of Tom Paine, nor to Vaclav Havel, whose English-language version of 'Power of the Powerless' he edited almost fifteen years ago.¹ His new book is a biography with a difference, both in style and content. Like most biographies it retells the fortunes and misfortunes of an extraordinary and, for many, utterly inspiring life lived in dangerously troubled times. Unlike most biographies, however, it does not keep the lens permanently fixed on its declared subject, preferring instead to explore, sometimes in painstaking minutiae, the various events, people and places that shaped Vaclav Havel's unique destiny. The end product is a lengthy but magisterial collection of fifty elegantly-written vignettes, recounting the ups and downs of the current Czech president as much as some of his country's historical moments in which he did not participate but by which he was nevertheless influenced. Although readers familiar with Czechoslovak history and the life of Vaclav Havel might object to the inclusion of a number of vignettes which do not even once mention Havel's name, or might hasten to point out some factual inaccuracies, the larger public, to which the biography is in fact addressed, will certainly find it a satisfying and engaging study.

Keane carefully reconstructs, deconstructs and contextualizes Havel's fascinating life on the basis of hard-researched new material, numerous

¹ John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1995, and John Keane (ed.), *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central and Eastern Europe*, London, Hutchinson, 1985.

interviews with family members, personal acquaintances and political collaborators, and original interpretations of the literary, and to a lesser degree philosophical, work of the playwright turned statesman. Unable to gain access to the post-communist president himself, but intent on writing the biography even without his subject's blessing, John Keane is forced to keep the distance that prevents turgid adoration and vain glorification. And this leads to what is perhaps the most important difference setting *Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* aside from most of the literature on the Eastern European intellectuals in general: an unrepentant rejection of hagiography. Keane sympathizes with his subject, yet his portrait of him is far from being uncritical. Beyond the conventional myth built around a man widely revered as the quintessence of moral rectitude, the British unauthorized biographer discerns the qualities and weaknesses of someone enmeshed in a tragic struggle first against political power and later with the consequences of assuming it.

The biography identifies power not only as the favourite topic revisited by the powerless dissident in a number of his essays and plays, but also as the key to understanding Havel's life and actions, prolonged anti-communist stand, determined bid for the Castle (the Czech presidential office), ambiguous position towards reform, or carefully crafted presidential image. The use of the concept is not without problems, since the biographer stretches it into the most private domains, 'to uncover the naked bodies in the bedroom, or to peek through the keyhole into the top-secret meeting taking place behind closed doors' (p. 12). In Keane's rendition, Havel's nomination, and subsequent reelection, as the first post-communist head of a Lilliputian Central European state appears less as a 'natural' choice than as the achievement of a skilful politician occasionally choosing to 'live in un-truth'. Seen in this light, Havel the canny political man is revealed as being at odds with Havel the acclaimed intellectual. Inspiring as it might have been, the dissident's plea for 'living in truth' proved a promise too hard even for him to abide by. As the author suggests, Havel's greatest misfortune in life was to have found that his dream of becoming president came true. Whether the president will have a change of heart in his final moments, and turn his life around to live up to his own ideal, is anybody's guess. The last sections of the biography have the strange resonance of an *avant la lettre* obituary for a man who, although still breathing, is unable or unwilling to bring about any significant change to his legacy. The reader gets the distinct impression that for the author of *Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, what Havel had to say or do was said and done already. Keane might be in for a big surprise.

Vladimir Tismaneanu's book on *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* is more general, more

polemical and more seriously controversial. Equally ambitious as Keane's biography, it sets out to explain the return of nationalism and illiberal sentiments in the region by mapping out what it sees as the most important discourses that have shaped the post-communist political climate. Of more mythical than ideological extraction, they deal less with how life actually is and more with how it ought to be in their attempt to give the individual a sense of belonging and a place in the world. Though emotionally charged, utterly ambiguous and essentially irrational, political myths have coherent narratives but also a pronounced relativistic quality, in that they are largely and usually the product of the voice that disseminates them. They tend to impose themselves in times of crisis, when communities lose their centre and polarize along more belligerent lines.

The book identifies a host of myths that, though focused on the past, are actually visions of the present and the future of post-communist societies. Distortions of the past and rewriting of national history, religious fundamentalism, fantasies of foreign conspiracies endangering a sacrosanct national interest, ethno-nationalism and anti-Semitism, decommunization, the myth of the messianic dissident and of the well-intended communist, and even privatization are all myths currently operating in the region. According to the author, there are in fact only four major types of myth each labelled suggestively as salvationist, vengeful, messianic or redemptive. We are told that the first type promises a salvation that is not a 'universalistic call for the unity of mankind in the glory of redemption' but one 'to achieve self-esteem by destroying and stigmatizing those who are different' (p. 63). Messianic myths like nationalism surely follow the same logic of intolerance, as does the myth of decommunization, but the author does not dwell on the differences setting the four types apart. What is more important, benign and malign myths are juxtaposed because they share a character distinguishing them from ideologies. The balance is tipped in favour of myths posing a serious threat to democratization, and Tismaneanu's options are unequivocally stated. He chooses civic nationalism over ethno-nationalism, civil society over intolerance and bigotry, and intellectuals over chauvinists. We are left wondering, however, about the usefulness of seeing so many opposite narratives as similar, since in the world of myths there is really no right or wrong, good or evil. True, the English term today denotes fantasy, untruthful fabrication bordering too often on lie, but then the liberal discourse centred on Enlightenment values which Tismaneanu approves of could be a figment of imagination to the same extent as the opposite narrative denouncing toleration of political and ethnic difference.

Different myths originate with different social groups. On one hand, according to *Fantasies of Salvation*, are the 'bad' intolerant communitarians

espousing the nationalism and authoritarianism that are gaining ground all over Eastern Europe. On the other hand, are the 'good' dissident critical intellectuals unwisely criticized by some Eastern and Western observers for lack of political acumen or presented as 'pathetic amateurs' whose current marginalization is well deserved. For the moment, the first group apparently won the battle, but intellectuals might still win the war if they gained enough support. Tismaneanu reminds us that intellectuals were the critics of the ugly politics of resentment both under and after communism, the creators of civil society in the region, and the opponents of the new radicalisms (p. 145). More than others, he argues, the intellectuals can provide the moral inspiration, the transcendent values and the commitment to tolerance so badly needed in a body politic assaulted by populist adventurers and pragmatic bureaucrats.

Readers might be circumspect of this lionization of dissidents as the privileged repository of the stuff that makes democracy work. The notion of intellectuals as disinterested seekers of civic virtue and truth seems increasingly unsustainable, as many authors have already suggested. Here John Keane is not alone. In their studies, Bill Lomax squarely denounced the Eastern European liberal intellectuals' elitism and disdain for 'the masses', while Andras Korosenyi suggested that these intellectuals have more appreciation for the ideal of democracy than for its practical application to reality.² Furthermore, as some proponents of social capital have argued,³ the civil society theory itself understands the society as being divided between the civic intellectual avant-garde and the politically unsophisticated larger populace. This view fits well with the group interest of the intellectuals, not to mention the fact that civil society is a concept implying a collectivity irreducible to a handful of individuals. These concerns have had little echo in some corners of Eastern Europe. Over the years, for example, the Bucharest-based Romanian intellectuals have issued several public statements, the last one lending support for Christian-Democrat President Emil Constantinescu in the aftermath of his precipitate decision to dismiss the prime minister in early December 1999, through a decree whose constitutionality is yet to be determined. Without exception, the statements were issued in the name of the country's fledgling civil society, although other autonomous segments of the society were not consulted, and prominent members of the state

² Bill Lomax, 'The Inegalitarian Nature of Hungary's Intellectual Political Culture', and Andras Korosenyi, 'Intellectuals and Democracy: The Political Thinking of Intellectuals', in Andras Bozoki (ed.), *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 1999, pp. 167-84 and 227-44, respectively.

³ Michael Foley and Bob Edwards, 'The Paradox of Civil Society', *Journal of Democracy*, 7:3, 1996, pp. 38-52.

apparatus were included on the list of signatories though civil society is supposedly independent of the official state.

The contention that intellectuals are central to the emergence and maintenance of a vigorous civil society also needs some further elaboration. Civil society in South-eastern Europe is certainly weaker than in Central Europe, but what is remarkable is that it exists at all, given the fact that this region had almost no critical intellectuals articulating the doctrine of civil society. The centrality of civic intellectuals for the democratic project is thus questioned by the example of those countries where dissidents failed to articulate a programmatic message placing civil society at the centre. Central European dissidents brought the concept to the forefront, but such actors do not seem to be essential for civil society to emerge in the South-eastern European cone. It is equally doubtful that producing more intellectuals would speed the crystallization of a fourth estate able to support a future democratic society. The composite profile of the intellectual in the East is that of a person who easily discards moral rectitude for a presidential councillor position or for membership on the board of one of the numerous state agencies with overlapping responsibilities and mysterious accountabilities that have mushroomed throughout the region since 1989. More familiar with Western conferences than with the fears and concerns of his fellow countrymen, the intellectual can perpetuate a culture of patrimonialism and state dependency with little affinity to the civic spirit.

Fantasies of Salvation shares another defect with recent studies on intellectuals: the reader can find only through inference who exactly are the liberal intellectuals the book refers to, since defining membership of the group is only of marginal interest to the author. Tismaneanu is not alone in his unclear usage of such key terms. Only one of the dozen or so contributors to *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*⁴ struggles, unfortunately without much success, with the central problem of defining the term. Tismaneanu, on his part, uses interchangeably terms like critical intellectuals and intelligentsia, dissidents and liberals, though he himself acknowledges that 'some intellectuals are myth breakers, others are hate builders' (p. 155), thus raising doubt as to the validity of his earlier distinction between liberal intellectuals and illiberal nationalists. In fact, the study disregards the fact that the former dissident-turned-liberal remains a *rara avis* in the region, and overlooks intellectuals who were too young to oppose communism and started to voice their opinions only during the 1990s.

⁴ See Irina Culic, 'The Strategies of Intellectuals: Romania under Communist Rule in Comparative Perspective', in Andras Bozoki (ed.), *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*, op. cit.

Despite these shortcomings, Vladimir Tismaneanu's book is energetically written, bracing to read. He has an enviably wide range of knowledge about the region, and while some of his arguments and generalizations will not command universal agreement, anyone with an interest in Eastern Europe, nationalism, democratization or intellectuals will certainly learn a lot from *Fantasies of Salvation*. Although the two books under review are valuable additions to the literature, the study of intellectuals will be informative and intellectually perceptive only to the extent that it successfully avoids the Scylla of sycophantic lionization and the Charybdis of unnecessary criticism.