

BRINGING LIGHT BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

Sir Roger Scruton

February 2017



Victims of Communism
Memorial Foundation

EASTERN BLOC MEMBERS



**Satellite
States**



**USSR-aligned
until 1948**



**USSR-aligned
until 1960**



SPEECH TO THE VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

I have been asked to reflect on my experiences in the anti-communist underground in Eastern Europe, and on the lessons to be drawn from it. Young people—and there are many such in this room—will have had no experience either of communism or of the Cold War, or of the deeper civilizational confrontation through which we all lived in Europe during the period following the Second World War. There is a natural desire to forget times of hardship and to move on. But although there is a need to move on there is also, as this institution testifies, a need to remember. We remember not in order to repeat our mistakes but in order to learn from them.


Looking back on it now, people downplay the cruelty, the suffering, the privations, the midnight arrests and the prison camps. Of such things they are inclined to say “Well, that was the aftermath of the war, and luckily it is all in the past...” The countries where those things happened are now part of the European Union, and have joined in the enterprise of creating a new and united Europe. So, “Let’s forget about communism: it is no longer relevant.”

But the project of forging a new and united Europe has faltered. And the legacy of communism has become suddenly clear, as we see the populations of the former communist countries fleeing to the West. We should learn from these things, and we should do so by looking back at circumstances that we did not understand at the time, but which have become clear in retrospect. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, after their liberation from the communist grip in 1989, found themselves rootless and lost. They were searching for the identity that the communists had buried. They needed to rediscover what they had been, in order to move on from the immediate past. Not finding what they were looking for, young people decided instead to flee.

It became apparent that the real evil of communism, apart from the cruel treatment of individuals, lay in the systematic destruction of civil society. Under the communist system, however mildly exercised, the Communist Party had refused to distinguish civil society from the state. It had regarded all gatherings of people with suspicion, unless it was itself in charge. Family reunions, the meeting of friends in bars and restaurants, attendance at church or synagogue—all such things were regarded as conspiracies against the ruling power, to be forbidden or controlled.

Of course the Communist Party was, nominally, distinct from the State; it had concocted a fiction of its independence. But since it had no corporate personality, could not be sued in law, and dictated who was and was not to be a member, there was no way in which the citizen could really treat it as

an independent body. In practice the Party was the State, and enjoyed the use of all the powers of the State, while not itself subject to them. Any part of civil society that threatened to escape from the Party’s control had to be infiltrated and, if necessary, suppressed. By this meant the associative instinct of the citizens was destroyed. It became dangerous to join things, dangerous to share any kind of social ambition or any sphere of private interests. Charities—which are the core of civil society in America—were forbidden. To collect money or assets for the good of others branded you as a criminal. Hence there was no way in which social initiatives could begin. The result was a



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society locked in the dead agenda of the sclerotic Communist Party, which lacked the means to adapt to the changing circumstances of the modern world.

We adapt to change by getting together with our fellow citizens and turning the change towards our common good. But when we cannot associate that process does not occur and society stagnates. That was why communism entered its period of collapse. The rise of global communications, the mass culture of consumption, the accelerating pace of the surrounding world—all these enormous changes lay beyond the wall, and nobody could begin the process of adapting to them. So a fracture opened between the Party and the citizens, and neither had the means to change in response to it.

Many people, young people especially, in Eastern Europe today, look around at their social and political inheritance and ask themselves “How do I belong to that?” Everything distinctive, everything that makes Poland Poland and Hungary Hungary, has been wiped out. History is at an impassable distance, separated from the present by the sterile desert of the communist years. The natural response is not to pick up the burden of belonging where the grandparents had been forced to relinquish it, but to emigrate to some place where civil society still exists, where it makes sense to join things, to pursue shared adventures, and to live at the pace of the new communicative world. And no place exemplifies those desirable features more appealingly than my own country of Great Britain. As a result Great Britain has a huge immigration problem, while Eastern Europe has an equally devastating

emigration problem, as the young, the industrious, the educated and the talented flee to more promising climes, leaving behind them a sparsely populated ruin.


We are therefore living through a continent-wide crisis, caused partly by the legacy of communism, and partly by the EU's insistence on the free movement of peoples. In a way this result is the opposite of what I and my colleagues, in the days when we joined the anti-communist underground, hoped to achieve. We sought to reunite the young people of Eastern Europe with their cultural inheritance, in order provide a light in the communist darkness. The EU offers them, instead, an escape route from their past. It offers to complete the work of the communists, in wiping away forever the memory of the European nations.

Rather than lament this new turn of events, however, I shall reflect on some of the lessons to be drawn from my own experience. The first and most important lesson is that the countries that had fallen victim to Soviet domination were not all affected in the same way. In particular Poland stood out as a place of defiance. The Polish Catholic Church had refused to concede victory to the communists, and recognized throughout the post-war period that it was engaged in a battle for the souls of the Polish people. Its hierarchy—the priesthood and bishops—were resolutely Christian, dedicated to the mission of their church, which remained a largely communist-free zone, under whose aegis people could associate in the old way, without fear of arrest. The Church had its local reading groups and youth groups, and the Communist Party had long since given up the attempt to control what was said or done when these groups got together. There was in Poland the only independent university in the Eastern bloc, the Catholic University of Lublin, which the Church had fought successfully to retain, even though it had lost most of its property and buildings to the communists, who managed to confine the University to a tiny corner of Lublin where it was thought to do no harm. The Catholic University was a great benefit to those of us who wanted to establish relations with the Polish educated class, since it was an institution where you could meet your fellow intellectuals as people, rather than as delegates of the communist system.

At that time there were also many vocations, especially in the Dominican Order, which offered to young men a way of life outside the official structures, and in honourable relation to the past and the identity of Poland. The election of Pope John Paul II, and his pilgrimage to his homeland, was a crucial event, which was to remind Poles that they owed their allegiance to a higher power than any that could be invented or imposed by the Communist Party. And the Solidarity union was, in those

days, more like the secular arm of the Catholic Church than a trade union on the Western model.

All that is recorded in the history books, and no one disputes it. But other countries were radically different, and it is important to understand that they each had their own way of resisting communist annihilation. Hungary, for example, had won for itself a comparative freedom in 1956. Prior to the Soviet invasion of that year the Hungarian Communist Party had installed a government committed to reform, in which Hungarian national feeling took precedence over Soviet foreign policy. The government was unacceptable to Moscow, and the tanks were sent in. But to the surprise of everyone, the Hungarian people fought back. This was a shock to the Communist Party and also to the Russians:



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and the immediate consequence was to identify Hungarian national feeling with the rejection of communism, rather than acquiescence in the face of it. Hungary became a country where communism was regarded as a necessary evil, and the Party itself, while reassuming power, was forced to allow negotiable freedoms to a populace that it was frightened to antagonize further.

In Czechoslovakia the reform communist movement of 1968 was also put down by Russian tanks. Unlike the Hungarians the Czechs and the Slovaks did not resist. They complained, they refused to cooperate; a young student, Jan Palach, burned himself to death by way of protest. But resistance was confined to such symbolic gestures, and the Communist Party continued on its miserable way, by a process of “normalization” that involved ejecting everyone with talent from the educational and artistic institutions.

It was not until 1977 that resistance began again, with the Charter movement that began in that year. The Charter, drafted by a group of intellectuals largely under Václav Havel's leadership, declared the rights and freedoms of the Czech and Slovak people as guaranteed under the Helsinki accords, signed by the reform government in 1968 and subsequently ratified for fear of precipitating a diplomatic crisis. The Charter was a call to the Czechoslovak government, and therefore to the Czechoslovak Party, to obey the law that it had been trapped into signing. Unlike the Polish case, in which opposition was

LAW NO. 120 of the Czechoslovak Collection of Laws, published on October 13, 1976, includes the text of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both signed on behalf of our republic in 1968 and confirmed at the 1975 Helsinki Conference. These pacts went into effect in our country on March 23, 1976, since that date our citizens have had the right, and the state has had the duty, to abide by them.

The freedoms guaranteed to individuals by the two documents are important assets of civilisation. They have been the goals of campaigns by many progressive people in the past, and their enactment can significantly contribute to a humane development of our society. We welcome the fact that the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic has agreed to enter into these covenants.

Their publication, however, is at the same time an urgent reminder of the many fundamental human rights that, regrettably, exist in our country only on paper. The right of free expression guaranteed by Article 19 of the first pact, for example, is quite illusory. Tens of thousands of citizens have been prevented from working in their professions for the sole reason that their views differ from the official ones. They have been the frequent targets of various forms of discrimination and chicanery on the part of the authorities or social organisations; they have been denied any opportunity to defend themselves and are practically the victims of apartheid. Hundreds of thousands of other citizens have been denied the "freedom from fear" cited in the preamble to the first pact; they live in constant peril of losing their jobs or other benefits if they express their opinions.

Contrary to Article 13 of the second pact, guaranteeing the

right to education, many young people are prevented from pursuing higher education because of their views or even because of their parents' views. Countless citizens worry that if they declare their convictions, they themselves or their children will be deprived of an education.

Exercising the right to "seek, receive and impart information regardless of frontiers and of civilisation" is also severely restricted. Whether it is oral, written or printed, or "imparted through an" — Point 2, Article 13 of the first pact — can result in persecution not only outside the court but also inside. Frequently this occurs under the pretext of a criminal indictment (as evidenced, among other instances, by the recent trial of young musicians).

"Freedom of speech is suppressed by the government's management of all mass media, including the publishing and cultural institutions. No political, philosophical, scientific or artistic work that deviates in the slightest from the narrow framework of official ideology or aesthetics is permitted to be produced. Public criticism of social conditions is prohibited. Public defence against false and defamatory charges by official propaganda organs is impossible, despite the legal protection against attacks on one's reputation and honour unequivocally afforded by Article 17 of the first pact. False accusations cannot be refuted, and it is futile to attempt rectification or to seek legal redress. Open discussion of intellectual and cultural matters is out of the question. Many scientific and cultural workers, as well as other citizens, have been discriminated against simply because some years ago they legally published or openly articulated views condemned by the current political power.



Prof. Hajek

THE CZECH authorities have now declared Charter 77 to be illegal. This is the manifesto which calls for more freedom in Czechoslovakia, and catalogues what its authors insist are violations of human rights conventions signed by the Czech government.

Charter 77 has not been published inside Czechoslovakia. But Czech officials have conducted a vigorous campaign of harassment

and vilification against its leading signatories, and four of them are now under arrest.

In the West, the campaign against the signatories has been widely condemned, and most of the Communist parties of Western Europe have declared their solidarity with them. Here is the full text of Charter 77. The translation is taken from the US magazine, The New Leader, which published it in its issue of January 31.

Their authors are responsible only to themselves and their own hierarchy, yet they have a decisive influence on the activity of the legislative as well as executive bodies of the state administration, on the courts, trade unions, social organisations, other political parties, business, factories, schools and similar installations, and their orders take precedence over the laws.

If some organisations or persons in the interpretation of their rights and duties, become involved in a conflict with the directives, they cannot turn to a neutral authority, for none exists. Consequently, the right of assembly and the prohibition of its restraint, stemming from Articles 21 and 22 of the first pact; the right to participate in public affairs, in Article 25; and the right to equality before the law, in Article 26 — all have been seriously curtailed.

These conditions prevent working people from freely establishing labour and other organisations for the protection of their economic and social interests, and from freely using their right to strike as provided in Point 1, Article 8 of the second pact.

Other civil rights, including the virtual banning of wilful interference with private life, the family, home, and correspondence — in Article 17 of the first pact, are gravely circumscribed by the fact that the Interior Ministry employs various practices to control the daily existence of citizens — such as telephone tapping and the surveillance of private homes, watching mail, shadowing individuals, searching apartments, and recruiting a network of informers from the ranks of the population (often by illegal intimidation, or, sometimes, promises), etc.

The ministry frequently interferes in the decisions of employers, inspires discrimination by authorities and organisations, influences the organs of justice, and even supervises the propaganda campaigns of the mass media. This activity is not regulated by laws, it is covert, so the citizen is unable to protect himself against it.

In the cases of politically motivated persecution, the organs of interrogation and justice violate the rights of the defendants — and their counsel, contrary to Article 14 of the first pact as well as Czechoslovakia's own laws. People thus sentenced to jail are being treated in a manner that violates their human dignity, impairs their health, and attempts to break them morally.

Point 2, Article 12 of the first pact, guaranteeing the right to freely leave one's country, is generally violated. Under the pretext of "protecting the state security," contained in Point 3, departure is tied to various illegal conditions. Just as arbitrary are the procedures for issuing visas to foreign nationals, many of whom are prevented from visiting Czechoslovakia because they had some official or friendly contact with persons who had been discriminated against in our country.

Some citizens — privately at their places of work, or through the media abroad (the only public forum available to them) — have drawn attention to these systematic violations of human rights and democratic

Charter dissidents explain their views



Dr. Havel

freedoms and have demanded a remedy in specific cases. But they have received no response, or have themselves become the subjects of investigation.

The responsibility for the preservation of civil rights naturally rests with the state power. But not on it alone. Every individual bears a share of responsibility for the general conditions in the country, and therefore also for compliance with the enacted pacts, which are as binding for the people as for the government.

The feeling of this co-responsibility, the belief in the value of civic engagement and the readiness to be engaged, together with the need to seek a new and more effective expression, gave us the idea of creating Charter 77, whose existence we publicly announce.

Charter 77 is a free and informal open association of people of various convictions, religions and professions, linked by the desire to work individually and collectively for respect for human and civil rights in Czechoslovakia and the world — the rights provided for in the enacted international pacts, in the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference, and in numerous other international documents against war, violence and social and mental oppression. It represents a general declaration of human rights.

Charter 77 is founded on the concepts of solidarity and friendship of people who share a concern for the fate of ideals to which they have linked their lives and work.

Charter 77 is not an organisation; it has no statutes, permanent organs or registered membership. Everyone who agrees with its idea and participates in its work and supports it, belongs to it.

Charter 77 is not intended to be a basis for opposition political activity. Its desire is to serve the common interest, as have numerous similar organisations of civic initiative East and West. It has no intention of initiating its own programmes for political or social reforms or changes, but it wants to lead in the sphere of its activity by means of a constructive dialogue with the political and state authorities — and particularly by drawing attention to various specific violations of civil and human rights, by preparing their documentation, by suggesting solutions, by submitting various more-general proposals aimed at furthering these rights and their guarantees, by acting as a mediator in the event of conflict which might result in wrong-doings, etc.

By its symbolic name, Charter 77 stresses that it has been established on the threshold of what has been declared the year of political prisoners, in the course of which a meeting in Belgrade is to review the progress — or the lack of it — achieved since the Helsinki Conference.

As signatories of this declaration, we designate Dr. Jan Patočka, Dr. Václav Havel and Professor Jiri Hajek to act as spokesmen for Charter 77. These spokesmen are authorised to represent Charter 77 before the state and other organisations, as well as before the public at home and throughout the world, and they guarantee the authenticity of its documents by their signatures. In us and other citizens who will join Charter 77, they will find their collaborators who will participate in the necessary negotiations, who will accept partial tasks, and who will share the entire responsibility.

We trust that Charter 77 will contribute to making it possible for all citizens of Czechoslovakia to live and work as free people. © New Leader.

Article on Charter dissidents

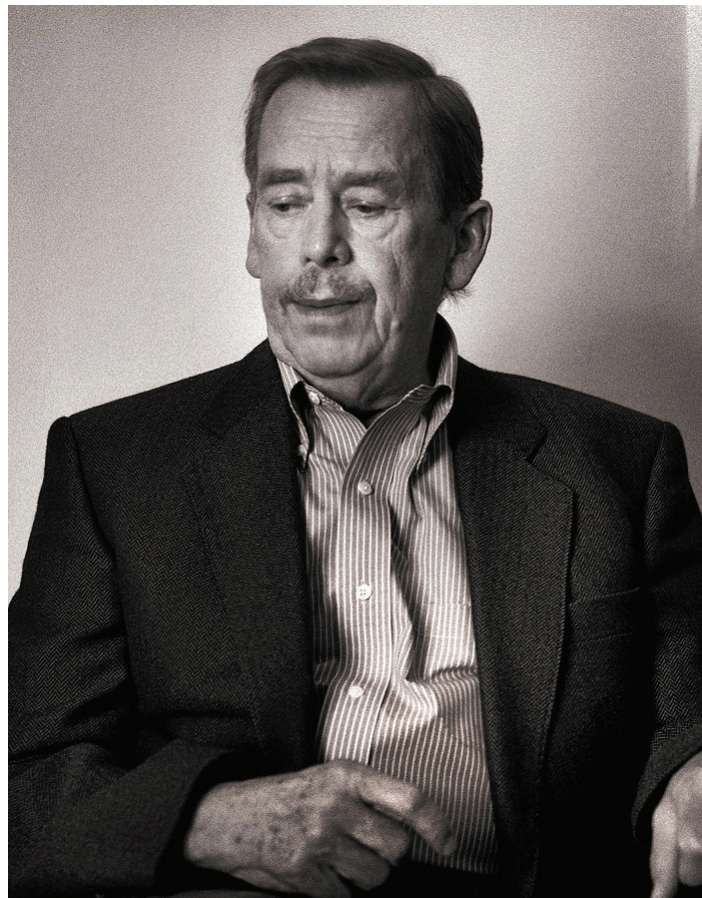
shaped by a nation-wide religious spirit, the Czechoslovak opposition was led by a group of legally-minded secular intellectuals—though it is true, also, that mass pilgrimages of the youth in Slovakia, based on the Polish model, did much to give the Charter the support of a populist movement.

In Romania and Bulgaria the Communist Party exercised the powers of an oriental despotism, backed by a ruthless secret police. Some of our network tried to extend their activities into those countries—notably Jessica Douglas-Home, who set up a trust to support the anti-communist networks in Romania. But the work was much, much harder, even if, in the long run, just as effective. (See Jessica's memoir, *Once Upon Another Time*.)

Our principal activities, in all the countries where we worked, involved offering support to private initiatives in education, and encouraging people, by visits and the supply of books, printing equipment and small stipends, to maintain and expand the underground universities that existed, in one form or another, throughout the communist bloc.

In the circumstances that prevailed in Eastern Europe there was no advantage to the individual in being educated, at least not in the way that we encouraged. There was no career to look forward to as a result of the underground seminars, except possibly a career in jail. True, the seminars created an arena of friendship and a center of conversation. And they

Václav Havel





Prague

had an inspiring effect, not only on the students, but also on the foreigners who visited them as teachers and colleagues. For they illustrated the ancient thought that true education is not a means to an end but an end in itself. The students were acutely aware that they were studying something that had to make sense in itself and to be valuable in itself, otherwise there was no point in attending the seminars. And through this thought our students became aware also, just as we did, of the radical distinction between useful nonsense and useless knowledge.

This is a lesson for us today. Much of the education in humanities in our universities consists of useful nonsense. Consider gender studies, which teaches young women how to look on the other sex with suspicion and hatred, while deconstructing the literary and cultural heritage of our civilisation. Such a subject, with its heap of nonsensical jargon and belligerent prejudice, is immensely useful, pointing women students towards a career in the wider world. Spouting this nonsense you get to the head of the queue for an academic job. Study real knowledge, by contrast, such as the language of Chaucer or the meaning of German Romanticism, and you will leave

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the university with something of great value to you, but of no use whatsoever in your career. In just that way we were able to teach in the underground seminars with no other goal than to replace nonsense—the Marxist waffle that formed the official propaganda, and which was the pathway to a career—with real and useless knowledge, which was the knowledge of the cultural heritage that the communists had wished to destroy.

How did we operate? I will give the briefest of summaries. A friend of mine, Kathy Wilkes, alas now dead, had—in her office as secretary of the board of Literae Humaniores in Oxford—received a request from a Czech dissident, saying

“Why don’t you visit us? Why do you visit only those official universities where they teach nothing but Marxist drivel?” Notwithstanding the fact that a large part of Oxford education at the time consisted of Marxist drivel, she took up the challenge, and did what was necessary if radical aims are to be accomplished—she fell in love, in fact with the dissident whom she visited. His cause then became her cause. So energized was she by this that she persuaded her Oxford colleagues, and me too, though I was not part of the Oxford world, to travel to Prague and lecture to the underground seminar that she had discovered. The aim was ostensibly to bring our Czech colleagues up to date with Western scholarship in philosophy and related disciplines. It looks somewhat quaint, in retrospect, to think that there is such a thing as the “latest scholarship” in the humanities. But it did not look so quaint then, in 1979, because there really was true scholarship in philosophy, literature and the arts, in those days before deconstruction, gender studies and the like had wiped away the curriculum. Moreover, it became quickly apparent that our Czech colleagues really did want to know about this scholarship, and whether it was relevant to their great cause, that of maintaining a culture of debate in their homeland.

We worked out a curriculum and began to make contacts through the underground networks in Prague and Brno, discovering more and more initiatives that were, or at least seemed to be, invisible to the secret police. Our procedure was ostentatiously to support, with visits and books, those open discussion groups that were visible to the police, and which would be regarded as the main centers of subversion, while concentrating our work on other initiatives that were to remain unobservable. Visitors to the open seminars risked arrest. But behind the scenes, if you had arrived on a tourist visa and studiously shaken off the person who was following you, you would contrive to arrive as though by accident in a little room where four or five people were waiting in silence. And in that room you enjoyed an educational experience that was quite unlike anything that you would have known from your university back home.

We ran seriously structured courses for such groups of students, on the nature of analytical philosophy, on social and political theory and on Central European history—the search for history being vital for our Czech colleagues, who had inherited the long-standing question of Czech identity. In a series of samizdat publications and discussion groups they pondered the relation of this place where a Slavonic language and a headless protestant culture had survived in the midst of a German-speaking and Roman Catholic empire.

Gradually our courses expanded to include art, architecture and music—with a circle of young composers in Brno whom we provided with regular visits from their British peers. Work in Brno was greatly facilitated by the “Theatre on a String,” under the leadership of Petr Oslzlý, which served as a front organization for many initiatives reaching across the entire province of Moravia.

For a full account of our work in Czechoslovakia you should consult Barbara Day’s definitive history, *The Velvet Philosophers*. Barbara Day was secretary to the Jan Hus Trust, and party to all its decisions in those exciting and difficult years. As for our work in Poland and Hungary, that still awaits documentary treatment, and I hope that one day it will be provided.

What is important now is to recall the encounter with people for whom education really mattered. This was inspiring to our Western visitors, most of whom came from universities where they had to deal every day with students for whom nothing mattered at all. Even if you were arrested and expelled—indeed, especially if you were arrested and expelled—you were given the rare experience of seeing education as a coveted asset, and also a threat. At a certain stage the Czech secret police made a useful mistake, which brought the arrests of our speakers to an end. They had decided to make an example of our next visitor to Dr. Hejdánek’s open seminar. The plan was to plant drugs in the visitor’s suitcase and arrest him at the airport for drug smuggling. The visitor in question happened to be Jacques Derrida, a prominent leftist philosopher and personal friend of President Mitterrand. The secret police had not done their homework and, by arresting Derrida, precipitated a diplomatic crisis that caused them to retreat in ignominy from all that they had planned. The experience improved Derrida immensely: his night in jail with a drunken gypsy cured him of his leftism. It also improved the secret police, who thereafter left our visitors alone.

Those private seminars in apartments were often conducted, in Czechoslovakia, by highly educated people, former professors who had been purged from the universities during the period of “normalization” in 1971. The purges were renewed in 1977 in the wake of the Charter. As a result, Czechoslovakia was unique among communist countries in containing a large class of unemployed and unemployable intellectuals who were also, such being the nature of the system, maintained in fictional employments, usually as stokers in large centrally heated buildings. This provided us with a trained workforce of a kind that no Western university enjoyed, since it was a workforce without personal ambition, and with no temptation to pretend to knowledge that it did not possess. In order to facilitate their work we supported a samizdat press, and were constantly pushing the samizdat houses towards semiofficial publication. In that world where books were a threat to the ruling power



Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat in Brno

they acquired a value that they no longer had in the West. After fruitlessly trying to get your British students to read a book it was a refreshing experience to arrive in this place where books were forbidden, therefore dangerous, therefore precious and loved. There was no difficulty in sharing your love of books with your students, nor was it strange to these students to seek to belong to the traditional culture of their homeland.

We made a point of not being partisan. That was easy for me, because I am a conservative, and conservatives are not partisan, as you know. However, my colleagues were for the most part leftists, even 68ers, and it was difficult for them to refrain from making propaganda for the causes that were dear to them. But even the leftists came to see that, in this situation, what was sought by the students was knowledge, not opinions, and that the whole operation was an exercise in the art of shutting up, so that writers greater than yourself could take the floor.

As mentioned, we branched out towards music, architecture and art. The First Republic of Czechoslovakia was the fountainhead of the modernist movement in architecture. Mies Van der Rohe's first attempt at a work of art in concrete and glass stood, then in a derelict state, on the edge of Brno—though it has now been revived as a museum, and become the subject too of an interesting novel, *The Glass Room* by Simon Mawer. The Czechs were very intrigued by the thought that some architects in the West were turning their backs on the modern movement, and trying to rediscover and apply the classical orders. And we were able to send them architects and critics who could give them

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first-hand knowledge of this anti-modern movement. This had particular significance, too, on account of the association between the early modernists—the Bauhaus in particular—and Marxism-Leninism. If you could recover from modernism in architecture, maybe you could recover from Marxism in politics.

The question arose, around 1985, whether we could not teach our students for a degree course that would be validated by a Western university. We enquired of the various universities that had been set up outside the traditional system—the Freie Universität in Berlin, the Open University, the University of Buckingham—and asked if they would cooperate. They all said no, concurring with our Foreign Office in the view that we were acting outside the received protocol and threatening good relations with our communist neighbors. However, one of our group was professor in the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge, which had since the Middle Ages had the right to


grant its own degrees which the university would be obliged to authenticate. He agreed to set up a degree course that would be examined by his Faculty.

Theology is a wonderful subject that can be used as a cover for virtually any form of humane speculation. We put together a course that gave to our students all that they wished for, the price being merely ancient Hebrew and New Testament Greek, which is a price they enthusiastically paid. At the end of the course they sat the Cambridge degree examinations in a basement, and their papers were smuggled in the diplomatic bag to London. There were three finalists: two received an upper second class degree and one, Jiří Schneider, subsequently deputy foreign minister, was awarded a first.

What about the wider agenda? I worked very closely with Jiří Müller, a factory worker who had been five years in prison and who worked from a tiny cupboard in Brno, running a samizdat press and a spider's web of networks devoted to defeating the communist assault on his country. He kept quiet about this work, and would not talk to foreigners, so that it took me some time to win his confidence. Through him we were able to provide tapes of lectures for schoolchildren on Czech history and literature, and these were distributed to schools across Moravia. To build networks in schools was, of course, especially dangerous, since schoolchildren belonged to the Communist Party. The rule was that nobody should know the identity of anybody else in the network, while Jiří knew them all.

Our rapid expansion was greatly aided by the invention of the portable computer and the floppy disk. One of our collaborators working in the grey zone between the official and the underground circles invented a Czech language program for PC, before any such program existed in the hands of the secret police. This greatly facilitated communication and made it clear, in due course, that something in the system had to give: we were running ahead of our oppressors, and they would have to become either more frightening or less. By default they chose the latter course.

Those experiences taught me that there is a link, in the end, between humane education, focused on what is intrinsically valuable, and the consciousness of identity—of what I am and to what I belong. Our students had been torn from their roots by the communist system, and they wanted to rediscover those roots, to repossess the past and the culture to which they belonged. Only if they could do this would they have the courage to go on, to recognize that being in the place where they found themselves was not an accident, not a meaningless joke on the part of history, but a call to duty. They wished one day to give back to their country the soul that the communists had stolen.




Those experiences taught me that there is a link, in the end, between humane education, focused on what is intrinsically valuable, and the consciousness of identity—of what I am and to what I belong.

I draw the lesson that the business of building a collective identity, which is not the business of the state but an aspect of national consciousness, is the enterprise that makes education worthwhile. This is increasingly relevant for us now. It is tempting to say “Totalitarianism is finished, there is no longer the desire or the power to control people’s thoughts and words and communicative actions. We now have social media which will bypass all attempts to dictate to us.” But it has not happened that way. We have social media and the Internet, and they bring new freedoms; but they also bring new controls. They are as much used to intimidate, to silence discussion and to propagate orthodoxies as they are used to foster educated debate. And the desire to intimidate has its home, now as then, in the universities. It was the student revolutionaries who led the charge in Russia in 1917, and the university Brownshirts who silenced opposition to Nazism. The totalitarian impulse manifests itself in education before it is observable elsewhere. And this is happening again in our universities. It is precisely in educational institutions that the instinct to control opinion is strongest. Lest, by chance, students should hear a forbidden thought they must now even be provided with “safe spaces,” in which to hide from opinions that might irreparably damage their psyches.

Consider the question of gay rights, as this has been treated in our universities. No sooner was the question raised than a firm orthodoxy emerged in liberal circles, and only one view was thereafter to be heard on the campus. Anyone who disagreed or hesitated, and certainly anyone who was passionately opposed, would be targeted on social media and even “disinvited” from the campus. There is only one view that is now tolerated concerning homosexuality, namely that it is a “legitimate option.” All dissent is branded as “homophobia,” a state of mind that must be excluded at all costs from polite liberal society. To be guilty of this crime it is sufficient to be accused of it, and once accused your career as an academic or public figure is in jeopardy. I do not say that dissent in this matter is right or justified: but I do say that it is no longer possible freely to express it.

There are many views like that, which are suddenly projected into prominence as icons of an emerging orthodoxy. We do not know what the next undiscussable issue will be—who could have foretold, for instance, that the divide between good and evil would be suddenly discovered to lie between

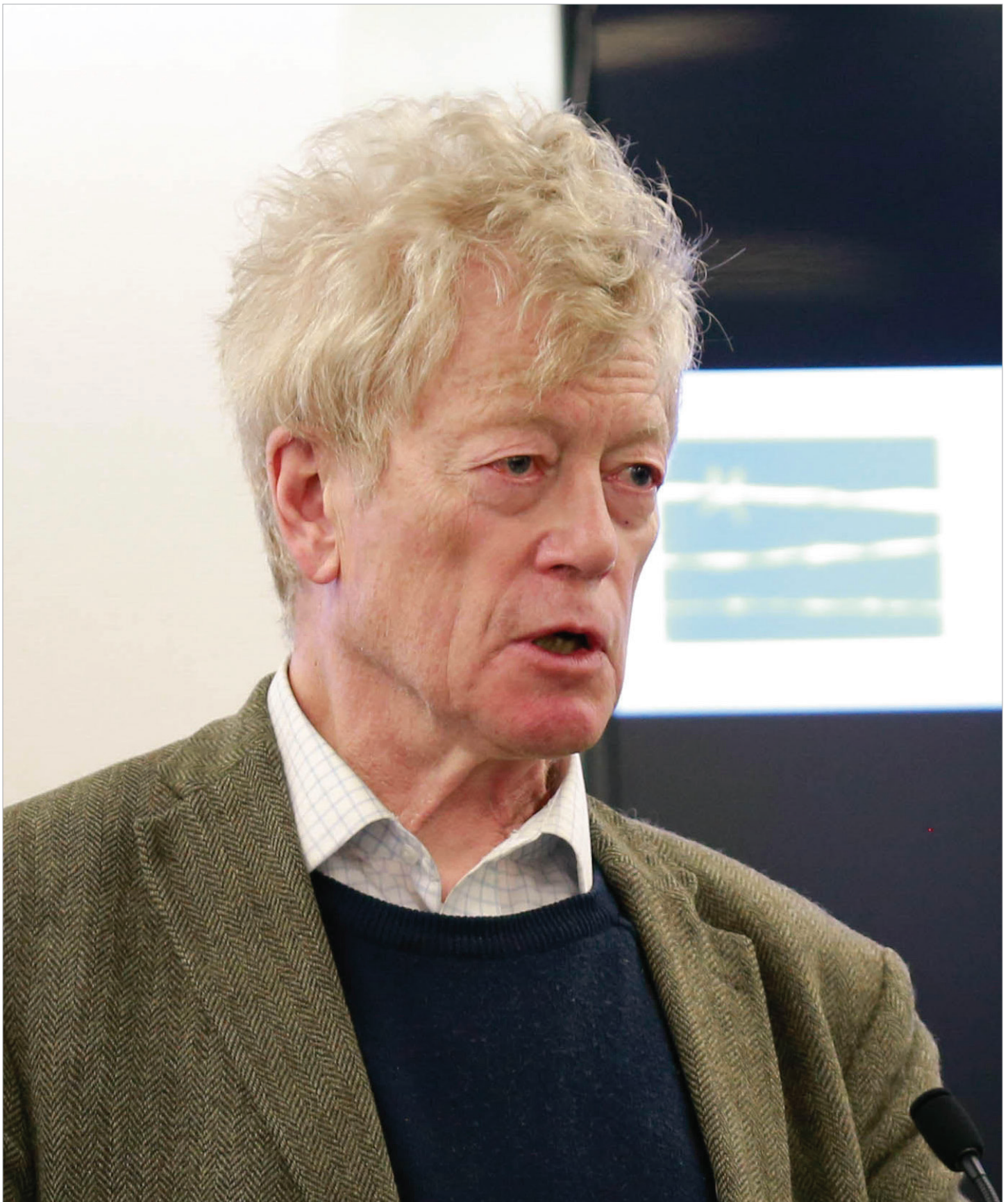
 It is precisely in educational institutions that the instinct to control opinion is strongest.

rival views about bathrooms? Of course, all this has an air of comedy, compared with the censorship exercised by the fascist and communist students of the 20th century. The penalty administered to the dissident who believes that men who define themselves as women should nevertheless be excluded from women's bathrooms is comparatively mild compared with that administered to the one who argued for the humanity of the Jewish race in a Nazi classroom or the one who taught the truth about Lenin in a Czech university. Nevertheless, the "totalitarian temptation" is with us today as it has been with us for over a century, and we should take note of it.

In the face of that, we ought to be ready to begin a new underground university, in order to defend freedom of thought against the new forms of belligerent ignorance. I cherish the hope that people in our democracies will wake up to the fact that degrees are worthless if no knowledge, but only prejudice, is required in order to receive them. When that thought has become widespread we should begin again, as we began in communist Europe, to teach to small groups of volunteers the things that they wish to know. Bit by bit our new underground university might grow, and as fast as it grows the appeal of the old universities will dwindle, until the last student of gender studies wakes up one morning with an urge to read Dante, and signs up for the underground course on *The Divine Comedy*.

IMAGE CREDITS:

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Sir Roger Scruton is a philosopher who has authored more than 40 books in philosophy, aesthetics, and politics. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature, as well as a co-founder and trustee of both the Jan Hus Educational Foundation—which has been active in the Czech Republic and Slovakia since 1980—and the Jagiellonian Trust—which worked in Poland and Hungary from 1982 to 1989. During the communist period, Sir Roger and his colleagues organized university courses, provided books and materials, and encouraged samizdat translations and publications in Central and Eastern Europe.



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