Booknotes

Does Philosophy matter? More precisely, does contemporary analytical philosophy matter? Well, whatever some of its students in this country might think, it certainly did matter to groups of dissidents in the former socialist republic of Czechoslovakia. It mattered so much that they were prepared to risk loss of jobs, discrimination, and imprisonment to discuss it in small, private groups, and to invite philosophers from the West to discuss it with them.

Ten years after the collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia, the story of these groups and their visitors is told in full detail in Barbara Day's *The Velvet Philosophers* (Claridge, 1999). The story is in many ways an inspiring one: how, in the late 1970s, during a period of particularly bad repression, Julius Tomin invited members of the Oxford Philosophy Faculty to speak to his philosophy seminars in Prague; how a member of the Oxford Philosophers responded; and how, from these small, rather particular beginnings the Jan Hus Educational Foundation was set up to involve not just philosophers from Oxford, but philosophers from elsewhere, and not just philosophers, but musicians, artists and writers more generally, who began to visit not just Prague, but also Brno and Bratislava.

In her book, Dr Day also recounts the story of the movements in Paris and Holland and North America which were parallel to the British Jan Hus Foundation. Naturally, she also deals with the high profile arrests and expulsions (including those of Bill Newton-Smith, Kathy Wilkes, Sir Anthony Kenny, Roger Scruton, and most high profile of all, that of Jacques Derrida on a trumped-up drugs charge). But most visitors were not arrested, and over the years they numbered well over a hundred, many making several visits to what developed as well-planned series of seminars and meetings.

Day does not shrink from recounting the human costs for some of those touched by these events in the then Czechoslovakia: these included broken relationships, alcoholism, and possibly even suicide, and from time to time mistrust and mutual recrimination. She also deals fairly but tactfully with controversies surrounding Tomin himself.

For the Western visitors, the standard refrain, when questioned by the authorities, was, 'Is it a crime in your country to discuss philosophy?' But in Czechoslovakia, associating with unlicensed foreigners was tantamount to anti-state activity, and those who did it were criminals and 'internal enemies'. Inevitably, then, the tensions and human costs were high.

But so were the consolations. As the blurb of the book has it, it 'was probably the most successful and influential attempt ever made to rescue culture from the Communists', an attempt made by academics of a wide range of political views (or none). In Czechoslovakia from 1979–89 the seminars themselves provided something special and otherwise unobtainable, particularly important because during most of the relevant period, no one in Czechoslovakia had any real hope of communism's imminent collapse. But

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at a time when communist archives from all over Europe are turning up discreditable secrets of all sorts, the fact that so many Western academics participated in this truly disinterested activity of learning and co-operation is heartening. Barbara Day deserves thanks for capturing this fascinating chapter of contemporary political-cum-philosophical history.

Someone who was actively interested in the Czech seminars, but who did not in the event go, was Sir Karl Popper. Naturally those in Czechoslovakia were interested in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and desperately wanted to see it in samizdat. Whether they would have been satisfied with the substitution of chapters from *All Life is Problem Solving* (Routledge, 1999) is a moot point. This is very much bottom of the drawer stuff (and at quite a price: £30). Much of it consists of occasional lectures given in Popper's last years. The mix of informality and simplistic aperçus will grate on many. In any case even if all life is problem-solving, not all of life is, and not necessarily its least valuable bits.

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