

Informing as a state of mind

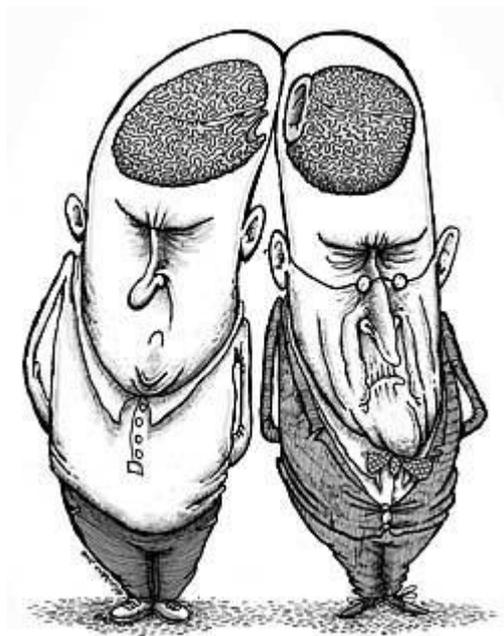
Czechs no longer accept such behavior, and that is a good sign for civil society
Commentary .

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By Aviezer Tucker

Public reactions to the recent revelations about Milan Kundera's alleged role and activities as an informer — while a student in the early 1950s — reveal a positive facet of contemporary Czech society: Its rejection of informing as an acceptable social behavior. It has not always been so.

Informing on friends or colleagues, denouncing them to an authority, is rarely a political act. Kundera's immediate motive for denouncing an American-trained Czech courier may have been political. But far more common motives are envy, resentment, fear and the desire to avoid responsibility by shifting blame. Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes build on such pre-existing social vices. The original Greek meaning of the word psychopath means a person who denounces fellow citizens to tyrants. People who resent, envy and distrust each other cannot unite and organize to challenge authority. But totalitarian regimes can only widen pre-existing rifts in society, build on and strengthen foundations of envy and resentment. They cannot create them out of nothing.



As Kundera described in his early novels, Czech society during the 1950s was ripe for the totalitarian picking because it accepted denunciations and envy as normal, rather than psychopathic. Some Czechs of a certain age still almost instinctively attempt to carry favor with any authority by becoming its informers. This has little to do with ideology or politics. For example, in some restituted buildings, owners can rely on an elderly tenant to inform them who moves in or out of the building.

But Czech society has been changing. A decade ago, when I was teaching at Palacký University in Olomouc, one of my colleagues was a former informer for the communist secret police, the StB. He looked the part: With a beard, a pipe and a deep, warm and clear voice, he resembled the uncle you always wanted to have, somebody you could confide in. Under the new democratic conditions, as a communist informer, he was out of business. But old habits die hard: If any of his colleagues would criticize anybody higher up on the university hierarchy, he would rush to inform them. Nevertheless, younger academics considered him pathetic more than dangerous, a sad reminder of a bygone era.

The first Czech democratic parliaments declared clearly after the fall of communism that informing on other citizens is immoral. They did so by enacting the famous or, depending on one's perspective, infamous, Czech lustration law that prescribed the exclusion of communist-era secret police officers and informers from occupying positions in the highest echelons of Czech state bureaucracy. Estimates of the effect of the law on the actual composition of Czech elites have been grossly exaggerated. A few months after the enactment of the law, the Supreme Court abolished the lustration of mere informers. Even in the case of officers of the secret police, the law did not provide means for enforcement. Bureaucratic superiors were supposed to seek lustration reports and then act on them, dismissing those that were "positive." But, if they ignored the law, the law did not prescribe any sanctions against them. Furthermore, following privatization, economic managers were excluded from lustration. Still, the significance of the law was in clearly distinguishing right from wrong and declaring a deeply entrenched social norm (which was considered morally ambiguous if not downright a duty under totalitarianism) to be against the law.

I became aware of just how far Czech society has progressed in a very different context: Some years after working at Palacký University, my academic career took me to Queen's University Belfast. Before taking that job, I was assured that the sectarian politics that blight the province would not affect me, and indeed they did not. But, as I became acutely aware soon thereafter, the troubles in Northern Ireland run much deeper than politics and bear an odd resemblance to Czechoslovakia of the 1950s.

I was called for an urgent meeting with my supervisor in a sparsely furnished office smelling of cheap hamburger. The supervisor first bombarded me with a series of petty nit-picking accusations about an e-mail answered inattentively, wrongly filled-in forms and a mark that was submitted late. I was put on the defense answering that the late submission of the mark was the fault of the second marker, a professor who was unpopular with the university administration. The supervisor mentioned that I would co-teach a course with that professor in the coming semester.

The supervisor would like me to report to her any complaints I hear of regarding, or regulatory violations I witness, by this colleague. It is in my interest because otherwise my colleague would blame me for his own failings. I declined. But my supervisor insisted, telling me of e-mails she had received from him denouncing me, and inviting me to return the favor. I replied that I do not inform on anybody, friend or foe. But the supervisor persisted, mentioning my colleague's "big fat" salary, hopelessly trying to generate and then manipulate envy from a worse-paid but more accomplished colleague.

Having failed to metamorphose me into an informer, the supervisor "recruited" a resentful Ph.D. student who was our teaching assistant not just to inform on both of us, but also to act as agent provocateur to induce student complaints. She went on to tell weak students at the bottom of my classes that if they were unhappy with their grades, they could complain about my teaching and receive better grades through managerial intervention.

A few years before I arrived, academic democratic self-governance was abolished and replaced with a managerial system at Belfast's Queen's University. Managers, lacking democratic legitimacy, have sought to control the faculty by increasing exponentially the number of regulations, keeping them sufficiently vague to turn anybody into a

potential violator, and then encouraged rifts, envy and resentments between faculty members to divide, rule and encourage denunciations. Eventually, informing became an end in itself. Managers demanded that their employees inform on each other, not for any particular institutional reason but as a sign of subservience.

I doubt the managers who initiated and operated this system knew much of the history of totalitarianism. Indeed, they found pronouncing “totalitarianism” challenging. They told me that they consider such divide, denounce and rule methods objective “managerial techniques.” However, such “techniques” would not have been effective in a society with civic solidarity. I cannot imagine a normal American university where such methods would be effective rather than generate faculty revolt. In the case of Queen’s University Belfast, they only led members of faculty to “emigrate,” and so the university has been losing its best brains, as was the case in communist countries. When I told of my experiences to friendly more senior colleagues and the representatives of the trade unions, they actually giggled. They perceived informing on colleagues as contemporary Czech academics would look at a love affair between a professor and a doctoral student: not quite proper or commendable, but an inevitable aspect of human beings working together in close quarters, and nothing to fuss about.

A culture of denunciation can start at home, when parents encourage siblings to inform on each other, continue at school when students inform on each other to their teachers and culminates with denunciations to professional or political authorities. Such cultural habits, the acceptance of authoritarian control and the instinctive attempt to carry favor with it by denouncing one’s peers, can survive political changes for generations. The result is the tearing apart of the delicate fabric of mutual trust and cooperation that enables the construction of civilized society. Once this fabric is torn, society declines, through psychopathy into barbarism.

The reactions to the Kundera affair, whether condemning him for being immoral or defending him by understanding his actions in their historical and political context, share the current moral rejection of informing. The Czechs have literally grown out of such cultural norms. This only bodes well to the consolidation of Czech civil society and democracy.

— The writer is the author of *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence: From Patočka to Havel*. He is finishing a book to be called

The Legacies of Totalitarianism: A Political Theory of Post-Totalitarianism, and formally taught at the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy of Queens University Belfast.

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