The crushing of the Prague Spring by military force was a turning point in Soviet and East European politics, and also in the efforts, both in the East and West, to interpret the nature of communist systems. During the 1960s the concept of ‘totalitarianism’, which had dominated thinking in the 1940s and 1950s, gave way to alternative models of communist society. The term ‘totalitarianism’ was hardly used in Central and Eastern Europe itself, as intellectuals and political activists were encouraged by the decline of total control over the individual and society and were hopeful that a pluralistic system might emerge as a result of actions taken within the system. Simultaneously, in the West many scholars discarded the totalitarian concept and advanced a plethora of alternative paradigms better able, it was thought, to explain the change and diversity within the communist world since 1956. The violent interruption of what seemed almost a revolutionary change in Czechoslovakia produced a resurgence of the concept of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe and to some degree a backlash in Western political science by those who felt that their conception of the realities was vindicated by events.

In ensuing years, in Eastern Europe, oppositionists were more or less unanimous in once again defining the prevailing systems as totalitarian. This was conceived as the ‘absorption of society by the state, through terror or other means of control, so as to forbid any subordinate spontaneity or institutionalised autonomy’. Ironically, however, it was becoming increasingly clear, especially during the 1970s, that there was another side to the coin, namely the expression of various forms of individual and group dissent, sometimes assuming dimensions which challenged the exclusive control of society by the state. At the ‘lowest’ level individuals began to resist the state’s claims on their lives and to act independently, even at some risk, to vindicate their own values and interests. At a higher level, organised defiance of the existing system took place in what came to be called ‘dissidence’. This took varied forms and assumed differing degrees of organisation and of mutual support among the various groups formed. A host of alternative concepts emerged, both among the so-called ‘dissidents’, and among scholars in East and West, who were
trying to comprehend these phenomena. We shall mention at the outset (and discuss more fully later) terms such as ‘independent civic initiatives’, ‘independent’ or ‘parallel’ society, ‘civil society’, ‘second economy’, ‘second culture’, ‘second public sphere’, ‘self-organisation of society’, ‘parallel politics’, ‘anti-politics’ or ‘non-political politics’, a ‘second polity’, a ‘contra-system’, and, broadest of all, ‘a second society’.

Both the reality of ‘independent activities’ and the concepts employed to describe and define them seemed to run counter to the notion of the total domination of society by the state and to negate the essence of a totalitarian system. Paradoxically, however, in the European Communist countries, the systems were still regarded as ‘totalitarian’, in spite of tendencies toward autonomous activity which were present, sometimes in considerable strength. This dialectic of opposites, it was sometimes said, was the product of the natural inclination of individuals to resist the artificial system of state control of their lives and of society, and the equally logical efforts by the state to eliminate any independent and spontaneous actions and to maintain, or to reimpose, rigid state domination of society and the individual.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE

The concept of an independent society resembled a much more ancient interpretation of the relationship of the state and of civil society, expressed in manifold ways by Hobbes and Locke, Paine, Hegel, de Toqueville, and Marx. This was argued in some detail by John Keane, in his discussion of what he called ‘a rediscovery of civil society’ – ‘an independent, pluralistic, self-organizing civil society’ – in Western thought. The central point was the relationship of the state, as a network of political institutions (including the military, legal, administrative, economic, and cultural organizations) to civil society as ‘the realm of social (i.e., privately owned or voluntarily organized) activities which are legally recognized and guaranteed’. This concept of the state versus civil society was being revived and re-thought as a relationship which was applicable to both Western and Eastern European states.3

The idea of ‘civil society’ was explicitly applied to Poland, for instance, by Jacques Rupnik, in his study of Polish ‘dissent’ between 1968 and 1978, which was subtitled ‘the end of Revisionism and the