

The time is right **for iconoclasts**

The times of crisis are the times of (and for) iconoclasts. The crisis of 2008 has emerged from an unprecedented intervention of government and big business in the free markets' functioning, while debasing and rescinding their duties in market regulation and oversight. President Václav Klaus, however, can be counted among the opposing camp: iconophiles.

BY MILAN ZELENÝ

The basic premise of free markets—that both sides of a business transaction must benefit—has been grossly violated. The gain of one side has been extracted as the loss to the other side: the economy has become zero-sum game without added value. But an unregulated market is not free because it allows one side to be cheated, deceived, misled, misinformed and lied to. While we protect the consumers against toxic food, we fail to protect them against toxic mortgages. Markets, in order to be and remain free, must be regulated, that is, protected against predatory practices of modern exploiters of freedom.

There is a fundamental difference between market regulation, which protects fair and legal benefits to both sides, and market intervention, which increases the benefit of one side at the cost or loss to the other side. Poorly regulated markets allow for excessive government and business intervention, ultimately to the detriment of all—bringing forth a crisis.

During the crises, upheavals and technological revolutions, we do not look only for innovation, but for new ways of doing things and for doing new things. The process of innovation is continuous and should be a part of the every-day business process. However, quantitative continuous changes are not sufficient at times of crisis: qualitative and discontinuous change is called for. If we had continually improved the horse carriage, we could never have stumbled upon the automobile. What we need are new business models, new paradigms, and new ways of thinking. In addition to innovation we also need iconoclasm and iconoclasts.

An image breaker

Who is a modern iconoclast? A person who does something that others believe or say can't be done. I find a good definition of iconoclast by Robert F. Kennedy: "There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?" Our own most famous iconoclast was Jan A. Baťa, the one who resolved to transfer a mountain on the other side of Morava river and who put his office in a company elevator. We often label such thought processes as "thinking outside the box" or "pushing the envelope."

Most of us are content with doing the same thing over and over again; the innovators among us strive to do things better and better, or, at best, to do things differently. Iconoclasts are willing and able to do different things.

The word iconoclast comes from the Greek *eikonoklástēs* ("the breaker of icons"), the one who deliberately sets to destroy cultural or religious icons from within a given culture or times. Iconoclasm does not include habitual destruction of images of dead or overthrown rulers, *damnatio memoriae*, which is a sign of cultural weakness, or the destruction of cultural images by foreign cultures.

The term iconoclast is now applied to any person who breaks or disdains established dogmas or conventions: the slayer of sacred cows, the destroyer of paradigms. The Ten Commandments explicitly forbid the making and worshipping of "graven images." Information is the "graven image" of knowledge—it is time to move from information to knowledge.

The time of crisis is also the time for attacking cherished beliefs, dogmas and "golden calves" in finance, business and economics—replacing them with new beliefs, new concepts and new paradigms. Many good entrepreneurs must be iconoclasts. They have learned to think creatively, to dream new products and services, new business models, new ways of treating customers.

To become creative, self-confident and fearless about one's ideas and actions, one has to learn and develop new neural connections to break out of the cycle of past experience, outdated categorizations and inherent laziness of mind. Long accumulated experience is, by definition, also a depository of frozen images, hard-wired habits and useless information. The unlearning of the useless, irrelevant and the falsely "sacred" stands at the core of the real education. One has to learn how to "experience" the future.

Human neural system, the network of its connections and pathways, becomes hard-wired with age and experience and its reprogramming grows progressively more difficult. Human perception, imagination, judgment and decision making cannot be re-wired unless we expose ourselves to new stimuli, new experiences and new actions. Only then we can rewire our neural networks and see things that we could not see before. We need a novel, ►





Jan Blažek

unfamiliar or “strange” thought, environment, encounter, piece of information or experience to jolt and awake our attention system in new directions.

We now need iconoclasts to help us to break out of rigid habitual domains and learn how to thrive in a changing world, how to function in unfamiliar environments, how to change ourselves. Otherwise our own crisis will come one day, the last one—and we will not be able to adjust anymore. That’s when we stop confronting new environments and start carrying our familiar environment with us, wherever we go. That’s when we will start living in our own portable surroundings and stop experiencing the environments of others. That’s when we stop learning and start becoming dead.

Preserving the past

Iconophiles are the very opposite of iconoclasts. They “lead back,” argue for preserving the old icons and golden calves, professing the old, tired and irrelevant, pulling us back toward failed thinking, petrified ideas and comfortable conservation of self-defeating and unsustainable behavior.

Is President Václav Klaus an iconoclast? A foreign newsman called the president an iconoclast. Although it is quite fashionable today, in the Czech Republic and Europe especially, to wonder (and worry) about Klaus and his psychological diagnosis, ranging from narcissism and arrogance all the way to egotism, demagoguery or hubris, Klaus is no iconoclast.

The Czechs have in particular become a nation of Freudian psychologists, ascribing to their chosen icon all kinds of artificially overblown, mythological and quintessentially male characteristics. In their deeper wishful thinking and longing for a strong provider and father figure, Czechs are misled and bound to be disappointed. No strong or exaggerated sense of manliness, virility, courage, strength, or entitlement to dominate can be detected in Klaus—only the opposites of such traits. His repeated planting of stories of extramarital affairs in the Czech tabloids, his arcane theatrics of “getting caught” with a plethora of young “lovers” can fool the Czechs, but they cannot restyle him into a macho man. While being comfortably snuggled in the lap of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Klaus is no Putin.

This “Provocateur from Prague” can certainly be called many things, but iconoclast he ain’t.

Klaus is an iconophile, both literally and substantially. Iconophilia refers to overblown respect not just for the image itself but for the movement underlying the image. Russian Orthodox icons of motherland, czar, nation, Putinism, etc., resonate with Klaus as strongly as his Western icons of the invisible hand, free market, monetarism, Friedmanism, and others. Klaus is the staunch

defender, not the destroyer, of such weathered icons of the times past.

In the age of iconoclasts, Klaus comes across as a relic, an old-time-religion believer, the preserver and defender of the old, tired, irrelevant and out of step. This is a rather unusual position to assume when the whole world is coping with crisis and longing for change, new paradigms, new ideas and new leaders. While most people feel a vital and self-preserving need for breaking the icons and images of the old, Klaus offers return and retrenchment, the embrace and idolatry of discarded refuse. This would be an inconsequential and mildly amusing stance for nostalgic individuals, but not for people in positions of power.

No nation, no matter how small, uninformed or isolated should suffer such a hopeless pullback toward Russian nationalism, autocracy and samoderzhavi, or the Soviet-style imperialism, socialism and murderous xenophobia. It does not matter which one—the world becomes poorer and more dangerous either way.

It is hardly surprising that Klaus has become ignored by America, isolated in Europe and so welcome and embraceable at Putin’s “dacha”—his imperial Russia. No wonder, that Putin has “rescued” Klaus from his isolation and awarded him the Pushkin Medal for the promotion of Russian culture in 1997. Klaus has remained loyal ever since, distancing himself from Europe and America while defending Russia over the war in South Ossetia and her violation of the sovereignty of Georgia. This is quite reminiscent of Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš’s “rescue” by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin after World War II. Klaus is becoming like Beneš.

Most Czechs, unfortunately, follow faithfully in tow: procrastinating endlessly on the Treaty of Lisbon, although a part of European Union; vacillating on anti-terrorist foreign missions, although a part of NATO; and following Russian designs by opposing the U.S.-led anti-missile radar system, although a self-declared part of the community of nations.

Playing the odds

Klaus is not only iconophile, he is also a contrarian. A contrarian is someone who strives to profit by investing in a manner that habitually differs from the majority view, betting that the consensus opinion turns out to be wrong. Klaus is a contrarian par excellence. He has to oppose every view, even his own, as soon as it becomes accepted by majority or espoused as conventional wisdom. The “Contrarian of Prague” is a correct label for a leader who leads back and against, not forward and for something. His opposition to the EU is self-serving contrarian pose, without offering an alternative, like Beneš waiting for his Stalin.

A contrarian cannot help himself from

being against things. Klaus has become a globally prominent voice of skepticism about what he calls global-warming “alarmism.” Also, his dissenting views on just about everything, ranging from modern architecture, computers, the Internet, knowledge, trust, Russia, Kosovo, Transnistria, Georgia, America and of course climate change, have become well known.

In Czech economic folklore, Klaus distinguished himself by such assertions that there is no dirty money, it does not matter who owns it, it does not matter what we produce, etc., leading to the bizarre economic transformation, transferring, via his coupon privatization, properties of the state safely into the hands of communist old-boy networks, Russian mafiosos and cronies, and foreign “investors” who took over industrial concern Škoda Works (now called **Škoda Holding**), brewer **Plzeňský Prazdroj** and countless other treasures of the Czech economy—all irreversibly gone with the compliments of this “proti všem” contrarian.

The art of opportunity

In addition to iconophilia and contrarianism, President Klaus is also an accomplished opportunist. Although all politicians are opportunists to a degree, Klaus towers above them all in refining opportunism into an art. His political style is seizing any opportunity to extend his political influence at almost any price. He is willing to abandon important political principles that he previously espoused, in the process of trying to increase his visibility and influence, even over the smallest of territories. A man without qualities, he was instrumental in breaking up Czechoslovakia, is trying to destroy his own party, the Civic Democrats (ODS); marginalize his own country, the Czech Republic; and offend his own Europe, in the form of the EU—all in order to appease Russia, contrary to the better intuition of the Czechs. Why is he playing Moscow notes more loudly than the European or Czech ones? Why is he pushing a vision of Europe as a loose alliance of helpless, defenseless and NATO-less nation-states that would be easy pickings for imperial Russia? We do not know. Do we want to learn his true motives too late? The weakening of Czech sovereignty vis à vis Russia is already quite obvious. The one group that supports Klaus’ anti-European activities with joyous glee is the communists.

Fortunately, Czechs have the last-resort access to Article 65, paragraph 2, of their Constitution: The president of the republic may be impeached by the Senate for high treason at the Constitutional Court. The penalty may be loss of his presidential office and of his eligibility to regain it.

Klaus exhibits a dangerous tendency to make political capital out of “good” situation instead of truly winning people over

to a principled position or improving their political understanding. People do not interest him, except in opportune contexts: then he exploits them, as the means toward his own goals, without compassion, concern or appreciation.

So, the Iconophile, the Contrarian and the Opportunist of Prague, is occupying the Castle, the ancient seat of Bohemian kings, the very icon of Czech statehood, diplomacy and politics, squandering Czech sovereignty from the values the West toward the “protection” from the East. He certainly is not an iconoclast, progressive or visionary like the great historical ancestors and leaders before the post-communist *atrapés* and political hoaxes took over the Czech lands.

It is not surprising that, like Václav Havel before him, Klaus was elected twice by Communists and Communist fellow-travelers. It is not surprising that Communist presidential candidate Jana Bobošíková (aka “Bobo the Red”), together with the convicted felon Vladimír Železný, both members of European Parliament for the Czech Republic, have nominated Klaus for the European Citizen’s Prize, in the best traditions of Czech contrarianism, provocation and misdirected Švejkism. Take the slogan “Evropě to osladíme” of the Czech EU presidency, an untranslatable double entendre that cannot be comprehended by Europeans. Literally, “We’ll sweeten it up to Europe” can be interpreted as showing Europe their middle finger. ... Go figure.

The need for iconoclasts

Yet, even in the Czech Republic, we need to cherish iconoclasts because they represent the last hope in this mercilessly changing world. We should cherish and listen to this very small and increasingly rarefied group of those among us who are able to do things that others say can’t be done. Iconoclasts perceive things differently from the masses: they see a different reality, imagine different worlds and march to a different drummer. They generate new ideas better than others; they better manage their fears; they pitch their ideas to the masses more effectively. They differ from us in perception, fear response, and social intelligence.

One of the powerful inhibitors of action is fear and the varied response people have to stress. World War II era U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”—which is especially true today, when fears translate into stress, stress into panic and panic into malfunction or inaction. Our response to stress is crucial: one cannot close one’s mind shut or lock away stressful influences in deeper drawers. Inaction or isolation is not the right response to stress. One must drive out fear and stress by openly confronting and diffusing the threats, by dissolving stress and transforming fear. The fear of the un-

known can only be overcome by opening up, not by shutting down.

When we conserve the familiar, established and well-known, the amygdala in our brain gets lazy, settled and uninventive. The only way to wake up the amygdala is through searching for the new, exposure to the unknown, and experimenting with the uncommon.

The true iconoclast is able to get around the obstacles of fear and stress. He is also able to put together the right social network on a larger scale: he becomes world wise and everywhere and under all circumstances at home and at peace with his surroundings.

But beware: strong iconoclasts perceive differently, talk differently and behave differently. Their challenges to conventional wisdom are uncomfortable and can become viewed as heretical or anti-social. Many such iconoclasts lack social intelligence and could end up like Jan Hus, Giordano Bruno, Galileo Galilei and Howard Armstrong. Take painters like Picasso or Dalí and compare them with van Gogh: all three great innovators, yet only the first two are iconoclasts. Picasso and Dalí were well connected hubs, embedded in their vast social networks of knowledge; van Gogh was a *solitaire*, an isolated and disconnected node of information. Klaus is a modern paradigm of isolation, disconnectedness, the infamous “*kül v plotě*” (sadly alone or abandoned) idiom of the Czechs.

Thanks to the Internet, we now have an effective tool for connecting creative loners into corporate hubs for fueling innovation waves. We now know how to turn innovators into iconoclasts. In the era of open innovation, we find social networking to be a virtually infinite source of new ideas, concepts, models and actions. The habits of fear and “splendid isolation” can be effectively modified and improved through the processes of socialization and social networking. Stay connected, worldwide. Avoid the false sense of “sovereignty,” avoid the isolationism and Klausism.

New ideas are always the minority

The innovator and iconoclast perform very different but complementary functions. Iconoclasts develop an open mindset and “opposable” minds, capable of knowing and considering contradictory ideas or opposing truths at the same time. Iconoclasts do not discover new ideas through testing, trials or scientific process. They experience a shock of recognition, personal epiphany and an “eureka” moment. Profound insights and compelling visions are revealed to them after long periods of intense reflection.

Take our current financial crisis. It has been brewing for more than a decade, so much has been written about it, and yet no politicians or businessmen listened. People followed their herd instincts and did what all the others did. No iconoclasts need

to apply! They all played the game “follow the leader,” mindlessly and with little thinking. They looked in the sky and were impressed by the V-formations of geese flying east, following the rules, monitoring their neighbors, finding safety in numbers. They did not see the solitary eagles soaring and circling high above, moving west. There is a plentitude of rule-following geese and so very few rule-giving eagles in our institutions and corporations.

Even though many read the signs and warnings, only a few listen, see or understand. The huge flocks of geese, nattering loudly and going east, cloud their vision. All mass-produced geniuses, house buyers, house sellers, brokers, financiers, fund managers and politicians all over the world have listened to the majority and disregarded the minority. Mass suicides are apparently not limited to hordes of lemmings or denizens of religious Jonestowns. If all others do it, why shouldn’t we do it too? What a childish value we choose to live our lives by, what a degradation of rational thought, judgment and decision making. All our historical experience shows that the mass-produced majority is seldom right and quite often is disastrously wrong. Any new idea, at its starting, is in the minority of one.

An iconoclast is like an eagle who defies the rules, but given the opportunity, can be an asset to any organization because of his courage and skill to be creative and innovative despite adversity. “A person can have the greatest idea in the world—completely different and novel—but if that person can’t convince enough other people, it doesn’t matter,” Gregory Berns said in his 2008 book “Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently.”

The key to curing any disease or malaise surely is disentanglement of overt symptoms from covert causes. Once the causes become clear, the cure turns out to be self-evident. The EU is not as big a danger as the former Soviet Union. Even the Czechs can and will snap out of the doldrums, indecisiveness and unbelonging in their existence—once they identify the causes of their iconophilical lives, suffering too many geese, cherishing too few eagles ... then the Czechs shall jump off their comfortable wall in the middle, stop ogling both sides with hopeful eyes and outstretched palms, and come down to the ground of reality, choosing their side, once and for all, like so many small and successful nations before them. Let’s hope Czechs will choose the right side. It’s about time. ■

Milan Zelený is a professor of management systems at Fordham University’s Graduate School of Business Administration in New York City and a professor of corporate economics and management at the Tomáš Baťa University in Zlín.