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IN PRAISE OF VÁCLAV HAVEL

Jacques Rupnik

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It is a great honor and deeply gratifying to be speaking here in praise of President Václav Havel. It is a privilege that is not without hidden difficulties, however. It is not easy to praise a man who is world famous as the symbol of the “velvet revolutions” of 1989, the miraculous year that began with his imprisonment and ended with his election as President of the Republic in Prague Castle. Like Thomas Masaryk, his 1918 predecessor as president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel embodies both in the eyes of his fellow citizens and in international opinion the figure of the philosopher-king, of the dissident intellectual confronted with the test of power and faced with the challenges of the reinvention of democracy and the recasting of a European order. Hence the tendency to interpret his biography as an illustration of the classic dilemma, in the quest for the common good, between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*—between the politician grappling with the constraints and trappings of power and the intellectual whose role is precisely to question power.

Václav Havel’s career and *oeuvre* can be divided into three periods: the playwright of the 1960s, influenced by the absurdist theater of Beckett and Ionesco; the dissident of the 1970s and 1980s; and then the president (1989–2003). To anyone who might be tempted to emphasize only one of these three facets or to set them in stark contrast to one another, he has just responded by writing a new play, *The Departure*, which could just as well have been called *The Comedy of Power*. For, with Havel,

theater and politics are never far apart. After all, in November 1989 in Prague, the Civic Forum—the cradle of the new democracy—was created in a theater with the prophetic name of the Magic Lantern. The Velvet Revolution itself is his best play, a theatrical revolution in which the people were invited to play the roles themselves. Milan Kundera wrote at the time: “The way in which he led the struggle was fascinating not just from a political point of view, but from an aesthetic one as well. It was the last *prestissimo* movement of a sonata written by a very great master.”

Playwright, dissident, president. And now, once again, playwright and dissident? The cycle does not necessarily have to repeat itself in full. Especially since—and this is what matters here today—we find the same theme running through the plays, the essays of the dissident, and the speeches of the president: a meditation on the deep workings of power and its language, on its forms of domination and manipulation, as well as on the reasons for resisting power and the ways of doing so.

The second difficulty (which is not really a difficulty) is that Václav Havel cannot be classified politically. Classic political cleavages did not have any great meaning for the members of Charter 77, and even today I defy the students at Sciences Po or elsewhere, after reading his writings, to find an appropriate political “label” for him. The great Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, who died recently, published a memorable article on this topic in which he humorously defined himself as a “conservative, liberal, socialist,” a phrase that has the virtue of clouding the issue and, from that point of view, would suit Václav Havel rather well.

The third difficulty concerns the ambiguous relationship of our honoree to political science. First, because he is in the best position to know that, for three-quarters of a century, it was those who truly believed themselves to be experts in the science of politics who constructed a totalitarian nightmare in the “other half” of Europe and well beyond. Next, because most political scientists have long focused their attention on the attributes, mechanisms, and wielders of power, and have regarded dissidents as fringe curiosities. Political science took little interest in dissidence—and the feeling was mutual. No more than the other social sciences did political science anticipate 1989 and the fall of communism, even if after the fact it had no shortage of knowing arguments to demonstrate that the collapse had been inevitable.

Nevertheless, twenty years after 1989, we can state one obvious fact: Václav Havel’s political essays have established him as one of the major political thinkers of the last half-century. From its publication in *samizdat* form in 1978 to today, *The Power of the Powerless*, to mention only his most important work, has been read all over the world—whether at Harvard or in Shanghai, in Tehran or at Sciences Po. Of course, everyone reads it in his or her own way and in very different contexts, but that

is precisely one of the reasons for its influence and its strong and challenging appeal. Using the experience of totalitarianism in Central Europe as a starting point, Václav Havel sets in motion a general reflection on the nature and logic of power in modern societies, on the roots and forms of resistance to dictatorship, and on the ethical and civic foundations of political communities. Notwithstanding the commemorations of 1989, it is above all to the political thinker that this honorary doctorate is being awarded today.

“Post-Totalitarianism”

Three aspects of Václav Havel’s contribution to contemporary political thought can be briefly mentioned here. First, he cast a whole new light on the concept of totalitarianism. As a dissident, he formulated an ethic of resistance in civil society as a foundation of politics and of a democratic public space. Finally, his reflection on the crisis of European modernity led him to conceive of Europe as both civilization and institution.

Since the 1950s, two main schools have occupied the highly sensitive political terrain devoted to analyzing the regimes then called “the peoples’ democracies of Eastern Europe.” In fact, these regimes were not democracies, but dictatorships; they were eminently *unpopular*, as the rebellions in Budapest, Prague, and Gdansk demonstrated; and they were not even in Eastern Europe, but in Central Europe.

Members of the first school, followers of the concept of totalitarianism as formulated by philosophers such as Hannah Arendt or political scientists such as Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, gave totalitarianism the classic definition derived from comparisons of Nazism and Stalinism—namely, regimes based on ideological mobilization and mass terror. As the years went by, however, this concept began to appear greatly at odds with reality and was soon challenged.

Members of the second school, in the context of the thaw of the 1960s and the *détente* of the 1970s, initially favored theories of development and convergence. Later on, they progressively adopted theories of “interest groups,” “limited pluralism,” and “guided participation” to analyze communist systems. But such theories brought these regimes into line not with Tocqueville’s view of democracy but rather with the Baron de Coubertin’s Olympic ideal: “The most important thing is not winning [elections], but taking part.”

Just as Western political science was discarding the concept of totalitarianism as an unscientific Cold War creation, dissident political thought in Central Europe, and Václav Havel first and foremost, appropriated the concept and redefined it using the notion of “post-totalitarianism” (in other words, “failed totalitarianism” or “totalitarianism with broken teeth,” as Adam Michnik put it). Whereas the totalitarianism of

the 1950s was based on mass terror, the post-totalitarianism of the 1970s and 1980s was aimed at achieving popular submission and resignation through selective repression. In his “Open Letter to Gustáv Husák”—a brilliant essay that I had the privilege of translating into French for *Les Temps modernes* in 1975—Václav Havel analyzed, with great acuity, the specific characteristics of government by fear:

The fear I am speaking of should not be taken in the ordinary psychological sense. In general, we do not see around us people trembling in fear, but citizens who look satisfied and confident. It is a matter of a deeper fear, one that has an ethical sense: a participation . . . in the collective consciousness of a permanent and omnipresent danger, an anxiety about what is or could be threatened, a *habituation* to the threat as an essential component of the natural world, an *assimilation* always more complete, obvious, and capable of various forms of *adaptation* to the outside world as the only effective system of self-defense.

“Habituation,” “assimilation,” “adaptation” to the threat—these terms refer both to the withdrawal strategies of individuals and to what serves as a substitute for social cohesion in the post-totalitarian phase of the communist system. *Fear as a style of government*, as an instrument for the atomization of society and for “its spiritual, political, and moral enslavement.” Contrary to the initial phase, where totalitarian power seeks collective adherence to an ideological vision of revolutionary change, post-totalitarianism seeks to demoralize each individual and make him lose all hope for change. What Václav Havel calls the crisis of human identity is closely related to the crisis of the system: “For how can the collapse of man’s identity be checked by a system that so harshly requires a man to be something other than he is?”

The Power of the Powerless, Václav Havel’s classic text, expands this analysis of post-totalitarianism and its blend of selective violence and institutionalized mendacity. What distinguishes post-totalitarianism can be summarized in this way: If ideology remains a form of ritualized legitimation, increasingly detached from reality, it is also a means of obtaining obedience. Havel illustrates this point with the now-famous example of the manager of a grocery store who places in his window on the anniversary of the October Revolution the slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” One is no longer asked to believe in the slogan, but to act “as if you do.” It is no longer a question of adherence, but only of conforming behavior.

The communism of the 1950s liked to think of itself as Spartan and made a virtue of inescapable scarcity. Post-totalitarianism, by contrast, was, as Havel put it, the historical meeting of dictatorship and the consumer society. The price for this was atomization and withdrawal into the private sphere. And it was a small step from social control to the birth of a *new social contract* that the state implicitly imposed on its

citizens. They were to adapt by accepting the lie and giving up their individual and collective rights, and in exchange they obtained job security and gradual access to the consumer society.

Without a doubt, Havel's most original and disturbing innovation in defining post-totalitarianism is that, unlike in classic dictatorships, the main cleavage runs not just between the party-state and society, between the dominating and the dominated, but also within each individual, who becomes in his way both a victim and a supporter of the system.

Havel writes: "What we understand by the system is not, therefore, a social order imposed by one group upon another, but rather something that permeates the society and that the entire society helps to create." This is one of the deep underpinnings of the regime, which partly explains the difficulties that the societies of Central Europe have had since 1989 in confronting their pasts.

The Ethical Foundations of Politics

The second important theme in Václav Havel's thought, directly linked to the previous one, is that (under the conditions of post-totalitarianism) politics can only be reformed if it is founded on ethics. By manipulating historical memory and information, power eventually destroys the very criterion of truth. Faced with institutionalized mendacity, society's resistance begins with what Havel (but also Solzhenitsyn and Michnik) called "living in truth." The ethos of dissidence, the "solidarity of the shaken" (to use the philosopher Jan Patocka's term), lies in the realization that "concern for the soul" of each individual is inseparable from "concern for the soul" of the polity.

Just after the collapse of the *ancien régime*, Havel defined the starting point for dissidence as the rejection of lies and "dissembling." The origin of this standpoint, Havel said, "which reminds us of Sisyphus or Don Quixote, is essentially moral, even existential; it stems from a deep sense of personal responsibility for the world."

Havel's notion of "antipolitics" thus derives from a legitimacy deficit in politics. Politics must make itself legitimate through something that transcends it—through ethical and spiritual values. Dissidence did not have the ambition of gaining power, and it rejected politics understood as a technology of power, but it did seek to become a check on the powers that be. It aimed at the self-organization of civil society, the progressive, nonviolent conquest of a *free public space*. Thus the primacy of ethics and civil society favors the emergence of a civic culture, without which the post-1989 "democratic invention" would have been doomed to failure. And beyond that, those who reflect today on the crisis of politics and of representation, or who anxiously observe a reunified Europe afflicted by democracies in crisis and populist upsurges, will profit from reading the speeches of Havel the president;

he reminds us of the fundamentals, the values, but also the issues and the stakes that give meaning to civic commitment and to a political community.

Václav Havel's third major contribution concerns Europe, the crisis of its civilization and its setbacks in adopting a constitution. For Havel's reflection on totalitarianism and democracy is not limited just to contrasting these two political regimes. As a disciple of Jan Patočka, Havel sees the domination of a hypertrophic, bureaucratic, and impersonal power not as a mere aberration of "oriental despotism," but as an avatar of Western industrial modernity, "a grotesquely magnified image of its own deep tendencies"—namely, scientism, the fanaticism of abstraction, and the rampant pursuit of what he calls the "expansion of expansion," the cult of consumption.

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The biggest mistake that Western Europe could make, wrote Havel in his 1984 essay "Politics and Conscience," would be "a failure to understand the [post-totalitarian regimes] for what they ultimately are—a distorted mirror of all modern civilization." In other words, for Havel, totalitarian systems "are not merely dangerous neighbors, and even less some kind of an avant-garde of world progress. Alas, just the opposite: They are the avant-garde of a global crisis of this civilization, initially European, then Euro-American, and ultimately global."

Globalization was not yet talked about back then, but Havel posed the disturbing question that still confronts us. And if Václav Havel's writings today are read the world over, it is not because they might reveal some little-known aspects of police thuggery in a fallen dictatorship, but because they transcend the political circumstances of the times in which they were written and still enlighten us about the world we live in today.

This is where the reflection on the crisis of our civilization is closely related after 1989 to the question of Europe—to the "return to Europe," which is not merely a question of the integration of the countries of Central Europe into the institutions of the European Union. Europe has no need, out of excessive politeness or a principle of precaution pushed to absurdity, to forget the legacies of its civilization and the values that underlie its project, which cannot be summarized by a single market and shared legal and technical norms. Without these legacies, any project for a constitution would be (according to Havel) an artificial, technocratic construct doomed to failure. For Václav Havel was the first European statesman—before Joschka Fischer and several others—to call for a Eu-

ropean constitution in the 1990s. He did so, among other occasions, in an important speech in March 1999 before the French Senate: “If we no longer want the [EU] to be seen as an inordinately complex administrative undertaking, or as an issue that can only be understood by a limited class of eurospecialists, if we want it to be closer to the citizens . . . [the EU] should, in my opinion, start drafting its basic law. By this I mean a constitution, not necessarily very long, intelligible to all, that would include a solemn preamble briefly describing the meaning and idea of the Union before defining the various institutions, their interrelations, and their areas of expertise.” And then he added, returning to the essentials, that the undertaking would have no chance of succeeding without “the spirit and moral foundation that give rise to the institutions and the documents they adopt.”

A short, inspired text, understandable to all, that would lead to a “parliamentarization” and “federalization” of European institutions. If, one day, the Europeans were to reconsider the constitutional project (this is not for tomorrow!) and start looking for a “founding father” who could draft a strong and concise text, accessible to all, they might be tempted to entrust the task to Václav Havel himself.

We could conclude this brief intellectual portrait of Václav Havel by mentioning some of the paradoxes surrounding the intellectual and power. The dissident intellectual catapulted to power also presides over the demise of the intellectual and the declining status of culture in democratic societies. He embodies a legacy of dissent commemorated on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary, but without being truly adopted by the political elites of his country.

Václav Havel may not have predicted the collapse of communism in the autumn of 1989, but he did analyze the reasons why the regimes of “real socialism” were doomed. Given that the history of societies is by definition unpredictable, he offers us some clues into what François Furet called the “enigma of the breakup of communism.” A system that deploys every means of keeping society under control or under anesthesia suffers from generalized *entropy*—here Havel borrows a metaphor from physics—in other words, from a constant loss of energy. Its inability to renew itself makes it slide into a deep crisis and eventually spells its doom. To use another metaphor borrowed from physics, we may compare the chain reaction that swept through the Soviet empire in 1989 to a “butterfly effect”: the small fluttering of a butterfly’s wings (roundtable negotiations followed by an election in Poland) triggers a major disruption that cracks the walls and destabilizes the old order. The sham is exposed; opposition becomes less risky while the cost of restoring order rises proportionally in accord with a formula that would satisfy the most exacting disciples of rational-choice theories. Fear changes camps, and even the greengrocer, immortalized by Havel, can remove the “Workers of the world, unite!” sign and—who knows?—take the

risk of going to Wenceslas Square to join the crowd as they applauded the dissident on the balcony and chant: "Havel for President!"

In Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society*, written in 1877, we find a sentence that fits 1989 and on which all forms of power unduly confident of their authority would do well to meditate: "A moment may come, a word may be spoken, and you and all your splendor will collapse."

Václav Havel's personal journey reminds us of the surprises and ironies of history, but also that the "exit from Yalta" and a divided Europe cannot be reduced to one event, even a spectacular one broadcast live like the fall of the Berlin Wall or the "velvet revolution" in Prague. It is a long process of emancipation whose legacy in political thought remains relevant today for all of Europe.

It is customary when speaking of the relationship of intellectuals to politics to invoke Max Weber's opposition between "the ethic of conviction" and "the ethic of responsibility." In Václav Havel's approach, the ethic of conviction *is* an ethic of responsibility. "Responsibility as destiny," he says.

Václav Havel, a writer turned statesman, has written through his literary *oeuvre* and his action one of the most beautiful pages in the history of freedom. On this day, Sciences Po is honoring a great European of our time.