ABSTRACT

This article examines the ideas within Vaclav Havel's treatise The Power of the Powerless. Havel's essay contains an exceptional analysis of the toll that the "post-totalitarian" regime exacts from the individual who lives under it. Although difficult to accept, Havel believed each member of society shared the blame for the actions of the regime. Consideration is given to some of the origins of Havel's ideas, as well as to the implications of his propositions. The concept and fundamental revolt that Havel proposes, "living in truth," is an admirable and necessary one. Yet some of the ideas he proposes for regenerating society are as insidiously problematic as the activities of the regime which he is protesting against.

Vaclav Havel's political and philosophical thoughts have become perhaps the most widely-known and influential of any contemporary Central European figure. His ideas, although postulated boldly and with conviction, are not extremely original. Nor do they offer much theoretical treatment of the issues they examine. Nevertheless, Havel's writings do comprise an excellent rendering of the personal, moral cost of living under communism. These writings have exerted a large influence, gaining him a sizable reading and following both in his own country and in the West.

In The Power of the Powerless, an essay published in samizdat form in 1979, Havel concisely articulated his political philosophy in terms of a response to the communist regime which he found devoid of all validity. He both examines the true nature of the existing power structure, which he regards as depriving its subjects of their human dignity, and offers his alternative conception of politics, a politics aimed at "serving people." This examination of the character and
dangers of the current system is exceptionally perspicacious, particularly concerning why the
system is bereft of all respect in the eyes of its subjects and why the system is so repressive.

Havel begins the treatise by explicating what he considers the true nature of the operating power
structure in Czechoslovakia, the structure which deprives its citizens of power in their personal
and political lives. He rejects the idea that this regime is a simple dictatorship or even a
totalitarian regime in the traditional sense. Rather, it is a "post-totalitarian" system. This is
because it does not fit the ordinary parameters of a dictatorship. Instead of being a historical
analomy, it has a historical foundation in the proletarian and socialist movements of the
nineteenth century. Despite its historicity, however, the post-totalitarian regime has lost the
revolutionary character which marks the regular dictatorship. There is no longer (thirty years
after its installation) any fundamental difference between the society which it governs and the
"consumer and industrial society" of the West. Havel argues this not because the economic or
political conditions are the same, but because he sees no significant difference between the
orientation of the value systems and morality of those in his society and that of those in western
countries. Furthermore, instead of wielding naked power as a classical dictator does, the post-
totalitarian regime possesses extremely well-developed mechanisms for exercising direct and
indirect power. Finally, unlike the dictatorship which rules largely by caprice, the post-totalitarian
dictatorship possesses an ideology which is systematic, thorough, and flexible.

This ideology is extremely dangerous, according to Havel. It is also extremely important to the
proper functioning of the system. He sees its influence everywhere. For example, a greengrocer
may place a sign in his shop window iterating a standard theme supported by the regime, such as
one calling on the workers of the world to unite. The grocer himself, his superiors, and passersby
may all well know that this is not a heartfelt expression of the grocer's political convictions. More
than serving to support the prevailing ideology, however, Havel observes that it acts to "conceal
the low foundations of power." It cloaks the base power which the regime brandishes. Havel has
little use for ideology of any stripe, least of all for a hollow one which supports a power structure
like this one. In fact, he calls ideology "a specious way of relating to the world." In his view
political power should serve utilitarian ends rather than abstract ones. Ultimately, this ideology is
for Havel both a facade and a lubrication for the mechanisms of power.

This ideology does nothing more than to support and excuse the existing power structure. These
mechanisms of power comprise a system Havel regards as being at odds with "real life," which is
characterized by plenitude and diversity. Rather than addressing the real needs of people, the
system of power is automatic--it serves itself. Ideology functions merely to cover the gap
between the system and real life, to preserve the position of the existing official structure.
Because it follows where the structure leads, ideology, like that structure, is divorced from
reality. Although (or possibly because of being) separated from reality, ideology becomes an
important pillar of power. It furnishes the system with legitimacy and inner coherence and
encourages continuity. It thus becomes a reality unto itself and promotes a "dictatorship of
ritual." Because the support ideology provides is so imperative, eventually power begins to serve
ideology, to nourish its base of support. Further, since ideology plays such an all-important role,
any activity at any level has to be connected to it. Each act, whether it be a public function or for
individual gain (or both), must be cloaked in ideology.
Using ideology to create a self-contained reality is an extremely effective and insidious method of maintaining power. As in the case of the greengrocer, all that is required on the part of the public is accommodation of the system; acceptance is really superfluous. The system, animated by a tenacious ideology, will function quite well on its own. Unfortunately, the foundation for this ideology is not a stable one. Havel calls this foundation "lies," for this ideology is actually separated from reality while claiming to define it. He argues that the ideology only works when people acknowledge the system's tyranny by acquiescing to it, when they "live within a lie."

Individuals do something very powerful and dangerous when they "live within a lie." They thereby contribute to the general panorama of ideology which maintains the structure of power. Small affirmations and compliances with this ideology serve to confirm this panorama. Because of this, Havel observes, each and every individual bears a portion of guilt for the functioning of the system. Everyone thus functions as both victim and oppressor. One's position of power only determines one's degree of implication; as Havel puts it, "the fault lines run through each individual."

The converse of living within a lie, according to Havel, is what he calls "living in truth." While poorly definable as a specific activity, it can best be defined as each and every revolt against manipulation by the existing system. Living in truth first has to be realized in the firmly private sphere, on the level of the human conscience. It then works its way outward as the unsubverted conscience directs the individual's moral and social decisions.

Havel asserts that any violation of the auto-totality of the system is tantamount to a total denial of the entire system's validity. Any act of living in truth "illuminates its surroundings," casting doubt on the efficacy of the system. Because the fault lines do indeed run through every individual, each rejection of manipulation impairs the individual's ability to function "properly" at his position in the system. So, although living in truth does not have to be a political act at all, it always carries political import. And since society is totally politicized under post-totalitarian rule, the threat posed by a truth-act at any point in the society is immense. However, though it will carry a political impact, a truth-act is fundamentally pre-political, since, Havel asserts, political reform must be merely a symptom of societal reform.

As is clear throughout the essay, Havel considers the individual and his conscience the necessary starting point of every other act in society. This rationale places him firmly in the Austrian line of thought characterized by Brentano and Masaryk, in which moral concerns and acts precede political ones. In addition, Havel also draws on this tradition's concept of "correct love" and the idea that by caring properly for the self and encouraging others to do the same, the individual serves humanity in general.

The pre-political arena is for Havel the "real" sphere of life, where the battle of living in truth versus living a lie--where victory over the post-totalitarian system--must be waged and won. There are two reasons for this. First of all, this is the point where genuine and lasting reform occurs, on the level of the individual. Second, in the post-totalitarian system true political expression has been supplanted by ideological ritual; the possibility of using politics to address real needs no longer exists. The power of politics has been usurped by its auto-totality. Therefore traditional political postures no longer function; they are outmoded because they cannot address the current needs of politics (i.e., supporting ideology).
Havel asserts that any attempt at political reform or change will necessarily speak to the pre-political sphere. It must comprise a radical break with the politics of auto-totality. It must always apply this fundamental criterion: can one live like a human being? For once one is free to establish a better life, Havel believes a better system can and will follow. Thus genuinely effective politics must serve to empower people.

Once he has delineated what the responsibilities and aims (and priority) of politics should be, Havel examines the nature of opposition to the post-totalitarian system, interpreting its activity in light of the proper bent of politics. He rightly realizes that the reason the state identifies and persecutes opposition so vaguely and pervasively is that opposition is merely "that which avoids total manipulation by the state." Regardless of the degree or significance, any rejection of total coercion is considered hostile. Thus while the dissident is simply "doing what he feels," in the eyes of the state he is rejecting the to the properhe system. And since the pre-political sphere is so important, the basic task of opposition is to cultivate and nurture "independent life of society." Outside the realm of official politics, this cultivation addresses genuine human needs and desires. Furthermore, simple criticisms force politics to consider these pre-political, authentic needs of individual people.

One of the major reasons that Havel finds a pre-political approach to be exclusively valid is that the legality of the post-totalitarian system is merely a hollow shell. Attempts to change the system are bound to fail because the system is based on the need to manipulate. And the law of the post-totalitarian society, though it claims to uphold human freedom and dignity, exists simply to prop up the system and its manipulations. Havel calls the law the "walls" of the "veins" of the post-totalitarian power structure. He recommends a course of dissent which appeals to the law because such a course challenges and exposes the character of the law's usage. In his words, these appeals work because they "threaten the whole mendacious structure at its point of maximum mendacity." Calls to uphold the law strike at the way the law is used merely to support the world of ideological appearances; these appeals challenge the government to employ the legal system for nobler ends. And for Havel, these ends are markedly utilitarian; rather than justice, law for Havel should enhance "quality of life." Securing and bettering the physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual conditions of ordinary existence is Havel's overarching aim, and law is simply one function means to accomplish this.

Hence the goal of opposition to the post-totalitarian system is to impact society. It is not to affect the official power structure, for the concerns which politics can actually address here are superfluous. Opposition does not confront the "actual level of power;" its real calling is to appeal to the individual's sense of responsibility and moral action. Since the regime's only possible concern is perpetuating its own power, Havel dismisses its efficacy, as well as the efficacy of attempting to reform it. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that how the attempts of the opposition affect it is simply an artificial consideration, because the real fruits of the efforts of opposition lie in the realm of real life. The regime has only two possible responses to opposition activities. The first is adaptation, in which attempts are made to bring opponents into the fold. This is dangerous to dissent because official sanction (or even recognition) weakens the credibility of that dissent. The second option is outright repression. Havel finds opposition and the existing system too fundamentally difficult to reconcile. He does not even attempt to reconcile them because he regards political efforts (including how opposition activities might impact the regime) as superficial.
Havel finds much wider implications in the principles he explores than simple opposition to the Czechoslovakian government. He divines in the Czechoslovak setting a disturbing tendency in modern man to function as his own repressor, to fail to master himself. In the post-totalitarian society, a system which was ostensibly designed to liberate an oppressed segment of society ultimately represses the entire society. Havel also stakes out some rather tenuous solutions to the inability of politics as currently practiced (particularly, but not exclusively, in the post-totalitarian scheme) to serve people truly and to promote personal responsibility.

In this conception of an honest, human politics, it is a "human" order, not a political one, which is needed. Formal political guarantees are only secondary; what counts is whether and how the existing political structure functions to actually serve people and meet their needs. This has several practical implications. First, political organizations should be constituted, not as bureaucratic and monolithic, but rather as "open, dynamic, and small." They should be ad hoc, formed only when necessary and existing only so long as they are needed. Second, political leadership, according to Havel, should be based on personality and not on ideology. Moreover, political leaders with sufficient personality should be granted substantial leeway to govern as they see fit. In other words, each and every governmental function should have a specific, "human" purpose, and the activities which serve this purpose (as well as the leaders who promote them) should not be encumbered at all.

Noble though the aim of a "human" government is, Havel's suggestions are largely quite impractical, if not somewhat dangerous. He presupposes a highly informed, committed body politic which could bear the burdens of system in constant need of attention and evaluation. In fact, drawing on a radical idea of Emmanuel Radl, a follower of Masaryk, Havel holds that political power requires the "full existential backing of every member of society." Radl had argued that each individual must continually renew his affirmation of his government and could at any time decide to break that agreement. Havel's wish for complete support from each individual at every new turn would be very difficult to fulfill. In addition, securing this support for small, constantly changing governmental organizations would not be easy. And allowing political figures to operate on the basis of their personality with few restraints could prove extremely fertile breeding ground for demagoguery. While need-based management has proven effective in the realm of business, highly responsive need-based governance in a ning of t is a different matter altogether, since governing requires that citizens' rights are attended to, even at the cost of efficiency. Any "human" government would still have to engage in the rather artificial tasks of tending to the macro-economy and dealing with other nations, matters which are largely removed from Havel's "real life." Finally, Havel's own doubts about man's ability to serve as his own master should provide perhaps the strongest caution against allowing too much latitude in government.

Havel has garnered much admiration for his emphasis on placing the moral dimension of existence before any political activity. This orientation places him firmly in the line of Austrian philosophical and political thought. There were, of course, plenty of critics of his ideas, even his fellow Czechoslovak dissidents. For instance, Rudolf Battek, another dissident, cautioned to observe a principle of "balance" between moral regeneration and using political means to right political wrongs. Evidently he did not share Havel's belief in the inefficacy of political activities under post-totalitarian rule. Vaclav Benda, yet another former dissident, was highly skeptical of the effectiveness of Havel's mere "moral" opposition to the regime.
Yet Havel's assertions remain significant, despite the substantive criticism and the impracticality of many of his suggestions. Forcing politics to incorporate human concern as its soul, living in truth, and granting power to those with ordinary concerns remains a worthy, though daunting, challenge.

SUMMARY OF TERMS:

correct love: Concept developed by Franz Brentano. The act of loving, along with the acts of judging and hating, must be oriented toward the correct objects. These acts of the will, when rightly focused, fortify the soul and moral character of the individual.

living in truth: The means of conducting one's life according to the dictate of the conscience, resisting any and every attempt at manipulation and subversion. The act of living in truth preserves the moral integrity and vitality of the individual.

post-totalitarian regime: The appellation Havel gave to the pre-1989 socialist government of Czechoslovakia. He chose this term to distinguish the government from those which he considered normal totalitarian governments. According to Havel, the post-totalitarian regime has a historical basis and carries out its repressive, essentially totalitarian policies systematically, under the pretext of legality. The regular totalitarian government, on the other hand, rules above all by mere fiat.

pre-political realm: The area of human activity and concern which is personal and directly connected with the fundamental and most important issues of life--particularly those which are moral in nature--at an individual level.

samizdat: Illegal method of circulating unauthorized documents under the pre-1989 communist regime. Typically a reader was allowed to have a copy only on the condition that he would type several more copies for further distribution. It was in this form that much of the independent thought under the regime was propagated.