

THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS (VÁCLAV HAVEL)

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This book was once famous, but was mostly forgotten when Communism died and so-called liberal democracy seemed ascendant. It is increasingly famous again, and relevant, in these days of a new creeping totalitarianism, this time in the West itself. Such timelessness is the signature of a classic work, so my goal today is to explicate Václav Havel's thought, and to show why its time has come round again.

Havel, for a while one of the most famous men in the world, was a Czech playwright, and an opponent of its Soviet-installed Communist system. He shot to prominence in the mid-1970s, although he had been involved in opposition to Communism since the late 1960s. As viewed from the West, he became one of the key voices of dissent, and he had a political career after the fall of Communism. But when he wrote this long essay, he was relatively obscure outside Czechoslovakia, and this essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, was the catalyst and skeleton for much of the subsequent internal opposition to Communism in Central Europe.

The frame for Havel's entire essay is that of a greengrocer who puts in his shop window a sign, "Workers of the World, Unite!" Havel's purpose is to analyze why the grocer does this in a totalitarian society (here Communist, but in no way limited to Communism philosophically), and what that means for the society of which the greengrocer is a part. Havel assumes, of course, that the grocer does not install the sign to show actual support for Communism or for the government, but because of some set of implicit or explicit pressures.

The overarching pressure is to ensure peace and stability for his life—to not rock the boat, to not become a target. It is necessary, in the eyes of the powerful, that he do so, not because one sign in one shop matters, but because it is part of a web of such signs and other signals of compliance, the whole "panorama that everyone is very much aware of. This panorama, of course, has a subliminal meaning as well: it reminds people where they are living and what is expected of them. It tells them what everyone else is doing, and indicates to them what they must do as well, if they don't want to be excluded, to fall into isolation, alienate themselves from society, break the rules of the game, and

risk the loss of peace and tranquility and security." It is critical to note that the greengrocer and everyone in his position have all "adapted to the conditions in which they live, but in doing so, they help to create those conditions." The self-perpetuating nature of the system, and that everyone is a part of it, is key. Unlike classic dictatorships, "By pulling everyone into its power structure, the post-totalitarian system makes everyone instruments of a mutual totality."

In placing the sign given to him, the greengrocer effectively strengthens the totality of the ruling ideology, and humiliates himself. Although it might appear to be, it is not the same in effect as if he had a sign saying "I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient," even though the substantive content of the sign is the same. The ideological nature of the slogan instead forms "a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual," which makes it possible to "pretend that the requirements of the system derive from the requirements of life." But make no mistake, the greengrocer, and all others in his position, in the "panorama," must "live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system." Reality has nothing to do with it; in fact, such an ideology is so strong, Havel says, that "there is nothing to prevent ideology from becoming more and more removed from reality."

So far, this is fascinating and insightful (and, as I will discuss later, increasingly characteristic of Western society). But what happens when the greengrocer rebels? What if he refuses to place the sign, instead choosing to "live within the truth"? He reclaims his identity and dignity, but "the bill is not long in coming." He will not go to jail (probably), but he will become isolated within the system and within society, and be punished with loss of employment, vacations, and other necessities and desirable tokens of life. The punishment must, from the ruling state's perspective, greatly exceed a proportionate response to the actual immediate impact of the greengrocer's little revolt, because his impact is potentially immense. He has struck at the feet of clay of the entire system, and "Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. The principle must embrace and permeate everything. . . . [T] herefore anyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety." Hence the ritual of suppression and humiliation,

the scapegoating, of anyone who steps out of line (there is probably something of René Girard in this, but I am turning to Girard soon, so I cannot precisely tell, yet).

Thus the key counterposition of Havel's thought is truth versus lie, and living within the truth versus living within the lie. Each person must do one or the other, but if enough people choose truth, totalitarianism cannot survive. (This is why Solzhenitsyn was expelled by the U.S.S.R., which was constrained from killing him, the traditional Communist solution. He was a witness to living within the truth, not a man with some unique talent or insight.) Crucially, this is only indirectly a struggle for power—Havel has nothing in common with, say, Foucault or other postmodern thinkers who view the world through the lens of power. In fact, the totalitarian system will, in all likelihood, retain all power until its end (an end Havel could not foresee), thus any challenge means only that “the center of gravity of any potential political threat shifts to the area of the existential and the prepolitical: usually without any conscious effort, living within the truth becomes the one natural point of departure for all activities that work against the automatism [that is, the ideological power] of the system.”

Havel is hopeful that living within the truth has a future, for the simple reason that living within a lie necessarily creates “a deep moral crisis in society.” One result is the formation of such civic intermediary groups as Charter 77, Havel's main specific touchstone of dissident thought in this essay. Charter 77 began as a surprise (a spontaneous response to suppression of a popular rock band) and “prepolitical”; its force came from its moral core and its participants' willingness to live within the truth. Prompt and ongoing suppression of any prepolitical civic intermediary institutions is essential to the maintenance of a totalitarian state, because they deepen the fractures caused by living within a lie (one reason that the Left in the West has done its best to destroy all such institutions, very successfully, either directly or by mutating them into tools of ideological indoctrination, as has been done to the Boy Scouts). The state instead fills the gap with “ideological ritual,” but that ritual still has a limited shelf life, Havel thinks, because it is based on living within a lie.

For the most part, living within the truth does not consist of dramatic actions. Immolation and martyrdom are not called for. “[L]iving

within the truth covers a vast territory full of modest expressions of human volition, the vast majority of which will remain anonymous and whose political impact will probably never be felt or described any more concretely than simply as a part of a social climate or mood. Most of these expressions remain elementary revolts against manipulation: you simply straighten your backbone and live in greater dignity as an individual." In this thought, and, in fact, in all of Havel's essay, can be found strong echoes of the currently wildly popular Jordan Peterson, whose focus is not precisely on survival under totalitarianism, but survival in modernity. Given that two of Peterson's specific focuses are speaking the truth and standing straight up, and that key to Peterson's thought is that reality exists, my guess is that a fruitful blend of Peterson and Havel could be made, one that would speak directly to the problems of modernity. I will stick to my knitting for now, though.

Havel criticizes those opposed to the Czech state whose main focus of opposition was creating a new politics. They miss that politics follows the prepolitical, the "independent spiritual and social life of society." If that is lacking, politics is meaningless in a totalitarian state. Offering alternative political programs is a fatal mistake; instead, one should "open oneself up fully to the world of human existence and then [] draw political conclusions only after having analyzed it." That is, living within the truth will point the way to a new politics, when and if that new politics becomes both viable and necessary. Thus, those living within the truth are not, objectively, an "opposition." They are instead normal people showing the way to other normal people. For that reason, Havel spends a lot of time pointing out that the common view of the "dissident" as a minority is the exact opposite of the truth. In fact, such a person speaks aloud what everyone else is thinking—even what the government is thinking. The key question is how to make connections to the silent and then build upon those connections (and the answer is to visibly live within the truth). Similarly, dissidents don't like to be called dissidents, a label applied to them by the Communist authorities. "They have not consciously decided to be professional malcontents, rather as one decides to be a tailor or blacksmith." They never decide to be dissidents at all. "Dissidents" are merely those who are willing and able to take the first steps publicly to live within the truth; it does not (necessarily) mean they have the most courage, just that they are able

to do so in their circumstances. And the government fears them not because they are a “power clique,” or for the alternative politics they offer, but precisely for the opposite reason: they are “ordinary people with ordinary cares, differing from the rest only in that they say aloud what the rest cannot say or are afraid to say.”

For Havel, therefore, revolt is not the answer (and would not even work, not just because of the power of the state, but because to most people, who are “soporific,” revolt would be unacceptable). One of his few concrete suggestions is holding the Communists to their own legal code, which was, in fact, a popular and successful tactic through the 1980s. Havel is quite aware that “the [Communist] laws are no more than a façade, an aspect of the world of appearances, a mere game behind which lies total manipulation.” Nonetheless, the unobserved laws still serve the purpose of ritual, binding the totalitarian state together, and since “the system cannot do without the law, because it is hopelessly tied down to the necessity of pretending the laws are observed, it is compelled to react in some way to such appeals [to the letter of the law by those living within the truth].” I am less convinced of this, and tend to think that this tactic was successful mostly because Communist systems had invisibly started to lose the will to continue, and a minority in the West used the false nature of the legal code to attack Communist regimes by highlighting their lies.

Havel makes no predictions of how matters will go in practice and rejects any value in speculation. By definition, “living within the truth” is an organic (and far from perfect) function, about which it is impossible to state what the future holds, other than inability for both truth and lies to peacefully coexist, meaning there will always be “latent or open conflict” if even a single person chooses to live within the truth. If and when this movement succeeds, Havel did not envision, or endorse, what is held up to us today as the ideal, so-called liberal democracy. This is generally known, but usually, it is suggested Havel and his compatriots in resistance to Communism (real, risky, resistance, not today’s sour and stupid #Resistance) instead wanted a “third way,” or democratic socialism, or something like that. But this is incorrect, totally, and only said, then and now, so that preening Western leftists can pretend that those who lived under actual socialism had any use for it, and merely wanted a slightly different form of socialism. On the contrary, Havel

(not religious himself) wanted a spiritual, national, renewal in which democracy in the modern Western sense of "liberal democracy" would play a modest, limited part, economics was not at the forefront, and traditional values rejected by the rulers of the modern West would play a very large part. That is to say, he saw the flaws in liberal democracy early, and he was not interested in socialism, or any system of government economic control, though he did see the spiritual dangers of consumerism. He called for society to "provide hope of a moral reconstitution of society, which means a radical renewal of the relationship of human beings to what I have called the 'human order,' which no political order can replace. A new experience of being, a renewed rootedness in the universe, a newly grasped sense of higher responsibility, a newfound inner relationship to other people and to the human community—these factors clearly indicate the direction in which we must go." Ethics first, then politics. Havel explicitly hopes to avoid the problems earlier identified by José Ortega y Gasset, the "revolt of the masses," where a combination of mediocre men and false guidance by putative experts was running Western Europe into the ground, through encouraging mediocrity and spiritual anomie, and by worshipping the false gods of technology, emancipation, and consumerism (totally aside from the struggle with Communism).

What this meant for Havel as far as a future political system is not precisely laid out, but what he does say suggests he believed in what today would be considered a profoundly traditionally conservative vision of the new political system. "There can and must be structures that are open, dynamic and small; beyond a certain point, human ties like personal trust and personal responsibility cannot work. There must be structures that in principle place no limits on the genesis of different structures. Any accumulation of power (one of the characteristics of automatism) should be profoundly alien to it." These should not be permanent structures, but explicitly ad hoc, transient ones. And, critically, Havel wants real subsidiarity (not the European Union's fake subsidiarity), "It is only with the full existential backing of every member of the community that a permanent bulwark against 'creeping totalitarianism' can be established. These structures should naturally arise from below as a consequence of authentic social 'self-organization.'" None of this would be guided by any ideology; "the essence of such a

‘post-democracy’ is also that it can only develop via facti, as a process deriving directly from life. . . .”

Havel ultimately had one of the chief voices in the post-Communist Czech political system, in which echoes of these thoughts can be found, along with many compromises, problems, and variations. It is always easier to write essays than to govern, even if writing was more dangerous to Havel personally. It is important to remember that the Left has constructed a false history over the past thirty years; liberals and progressives in the West claim that they opposed totalitarian Communism until its collapse in 1989. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and as Ryszard Legutko has documented, both before and after the collapse of Communism, Western liberals felt more kinship with Communism than with people like Havel. A read of *The Power of the Powerless* makes that very clear; Havel’s thought has little or nothing in common with the calls for meeting Communism in the middle that were the real bread-and-butter of all but a few people in the West, until 1989.

A second falsehood accompanies this first one—that the peoples of Central Europe sought to escape Communism so they could join the liberal democracies of the West. In its crudest form, this falsehood focuses on consumer goods as the touchstone—supposedly, people got tired of living with only being able to buy a narrow range of shoddy goods. Which is true, up to a point. I travelled in Hungary in the 1980s, as a teenager, and again immediately after the fall of Communism, throughout Central Europe, and there was certainly a dearth of decent consumer goods. But that was an ancillary problem to most people who lived there. In a less crude form, the falsehood held that oppressed peoples supposedly sought “democracy,” meaning “liberal democracy.” That is, they sought to receive a dubious package that included some increased freedoms, but mostly meant destruction of national cultures and traditions, sexual emancipation, erosion of religious belief, weakening of the rule of law, the strengthening of the state at the expense of private action, and the unfettered ability to vote for whatever was approved by the ruling classes, but nothing else. Havel’s essay gives the lie to all this, both directly and in the philosophy he conveys, which does not call for unfettered autonomy or personal emancipation, but the reconstruction of civil society along traditional lines.

As I said at the beginning, this book is newly relevant, though now the “creeping totalitarianism” is found in the supposedly free West, not in the shadow of Communism. Focusing on America for now, although the same oppression grows even more lushly in much of Europe, the truth is that in modern America, the same fear and self-censorship that characterizes Havel’s greengrocer is the daily, lived reality of social conservatives, really only within the past twenty years, and especially within the last five. They face the ideology embodied in liberal democracy, that Havel rejected, Ryszard Legutko’s “coercion to freedom.” Examples are legion, though you will not find them in the mainstream press, any more than Havel was found in the Czech press, unless accompanied by characterization as a “traitor and renegade.” No social conservative can speak freely on any controversial topic if he works at a big or medium-size corporation, works in most government or any portion of academia, is in the military, or is a student (especially a university student). He may only talk within an ever-smaller private sphere, and that not without risk or cost. (And new topics, and new opinions, formerly unexceptional, from gender dysphoria being a mental illness to that guns should not be banned, are continuously added to the proscribed list, as the Left tightens its control.) He cannot even express his opinions on social media, without facing a torrent of abuse from “friends” and the likelihood of being reported to the enforcement apparatus of his employer, as well as being kicked off social media by its leftist overlords (or their simpering Millennial employees implementing their directives). No equivalent applies to any person on the Left, of course, in any area of life. Upon reflection, it is obvious that every single quantum of totalitarianism that Havel identifies in his essay applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to American social conservatives today. They must also live within a lie to protect themselves, and they must ignore the unreality of the lies they are required to mouth, for exactly the same reasons in exactly the same manner.

So, to take an example from a neighboring state, in 2015 Indiana passed an act offering limited protections for private religious freedoms as against government action, identical to the “Religious Freedom Restoration Act” in force for decades at the federal level. Immediately a consortium of social justice warriors, leftist corporate leaders (especially the pernicious Marc Benioff of Salesforce), and homosexual pressure

groups forced its repeal. The substance of RFRA is irrelevant for current purposes, though. Instead, what is of interest is that immediately around the entire city of Indianapolis (and around the state) signs appeared in the window of most retail businesses, with a uniform, slick, professional design, saying “This Business Serves Everybody.” Although RFRA was nowhere mentioned, and the logo was a heart, not a rainbow, everyone knew that the point of these signs was to declare opposition to RFRA and to show compliance with forced celebration of homosexuality. Indiana has no state-level law banning private discrimination against homosexuals (just like the federal government), but nobody even bothered to claim homosexuals were actually ever discriminated against in any way—instead, compulsory perceived ideological approval of the homosexual agenda was the only goal. These signs were distributed by going door-to-door and offering them to shopkeepers, with the implicit (or perhaps explicit) threat of blacklisting or a social media mob punishing the business if they refused. A massive hundred-foot version was also hung in the Indianapolis airport’s lobby, signaling the compliance of Indiana’s commercial interests, who eagerly jumped on the bandwagon of hate and bigotry against normalcy and against reality. All this, of course, is wholly identical to Havel’s sign in the greengrocer’s window.

The effect of this creeping totalitarianism is that only a tiny minority of people can now openly disagree with Left orthodoxy on a wide range of issues—people with nothing to lose, or nothing more to lose. Retirees, perhaps, though soon enough ways will be found to bring them to heel. Blue collar workers, in some cases. A few journalists, as well: Rod Dreher, for example, makes a living by being countercultural, and he is an invaluable leader. So far, it’s worked out for him, it appears—but, certainly, he could never go back to “regular” journalism. There is no revolving door between journalism and opinion, or journalism and politics, for conservatives, only for progressives. So, even most conservatives toe the line, and increasingly so.

You are wondering, if this is true, how it is that I feel free to say these things? Am I not refuting myself? Ah, good question. First, of course, nobody reads my screeds, so there’s that. But certainly, in theory I, like everybody, have something to lose. The real answer is that I am (now) functionally unique—like an albino tiger, so rare as to be not relevant to the overall analysis. I am impossible to attack directly, because I am

independently wealthy, and I wholly own a business upon which there is no possible practical avenue of attack, public or private. I have no social connections or position that I might lose that I am not indifferent to losing. So, in practice, I am nearly self-contained, and moreover, I thrive on conflict. As Bruce Springsteen sang, "Some like to drink or gamble, Charles liked to fight." (Well, OK, there it was "Billy," but same difference.) Yes, my children might be attacked—but I have the money, and the will, to punch back twice as hard, and would not hesitate to do so, preemptively if necessary. But what I can do and say implies nothing more generally about the fear and self-censorship that, more and more, characterize any person who challenges whatever the Left orthodoxy is on any given day.

More generally, though, I think our American situation is both better and worse, in these regards, in the America of today relative to the Czechoslovakia of 1978. Better, in that universal totalitarianism of the Czech type, the problem Havel faced, is for us not a fully realized iron maiden; it is more like a slimy creeping fungus that has not yet wholly covered its host. There is still time to burn it off the body politic. Worse, in that the Cthulhu State, the universal goal of the Left, will not make the same mistakes that Communism did, either tactically or in presenting a dour Leninist mien; it will rather continue to offer atomized autonomy within the limits of the state, and various forms of soma-like entertainment, along with plenty of consumer goods, as it tightens its grip on the throat of a once-free people.

Oh, sure, it's not universal totalitarianism in America, yet. Nobody is going to jail for, say, pointing out that homosexual "marriage" is not marriage at all. (But they are in Britain and in the decayed portions of the EU, making those countries more totalitarian in some ways than Czechoslovakia in 1978.) That universal totalitarianism has not arrived is not due to any lack of will of the Left. Instead, it is due to the inertia inherent in structures they have done their best to destroy, and have successfully largely eroded; and to direct opposition, ultimately armed (which is a key reason for the Left's ever-shriller demand to disarm everyone but their Praetorians). But anyone who wants to be part of the ruling elite, the power structure, or to advance in society, must act continuously in ways no different than Havel's greengrocer, and this process is ongoing and ever more pervasive. If, for example, I still

worked at a big law firm, I would have to continually mouth lies about the benefits of “diversity and inclusion”; if I refused, or simply expressed any doubt, or would not publicly identify myself as an “ally,” or asked for evidence of the supposed benefits, I would assuredly be asked to leave the firm. I could pick any of twenty socially conservative stands based on truth and reality, or twenty different professions, and the analysis would be the same. And every year the noose tightens.

What to do about this? Havel, as I noted above, rejected revolt. His counsel was simple—to live within the truth. Can we do that? Certainly we can, but is it enough, or the sole right move? No, and no. As I say, Havel lived within an all-encompassing system, and we live more in the world of Czechoslovakia in 1946, and without the Red Army, where the concrete has not yet cured on the structures of oppression. Perhaps a better analogy is Greece in the latter half of the 1940s (without the proxy war aspect), or, even more, Spain of the early 1930s. Fighting now may prevent a longer uphill battle later—Havel says “There are times when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight.” Maybe so, but let’s try to avoid sinking, since Havel has helped us understand the truth. We can learn from history, rather than repeating it, especially that part about the misery.

It is possible that mere living within the truth as response will be enough, since our current system may sow the seeds of its own destruction, as did Communism. Havel calls Czech Communism “post-totalitarian”—still very much totalitarian, but lacking the terror of early Communism and the sharp dichotomy between rulers and ruled of classical dictatorship, since the entire society had been roped into participating in its own degradation. This is a type of ossification, and it took only a few decades in Central Europe from inception to calcification. Such ossification is perhaps just as inevitable for our modern totalitarianism, since what modern “liberal democracy” requires is no less living within a lie and adherence to unreality than was the system under which Havel lived, and equally susceptible to auto-implosion when faced with the truth. Moreover, if it occurs, the speed of such change, it seems to me, is likely accelerated by modern technology, particularly of communication. For example, *samizdat* was instrumental in living within the truth in Havel’s time, but it was difficult to create

and disseminate. It is much easier now (and increasingly called for as all popular media is censored to suppress conservative thought, as Twitter formally announced its intention to do this week). Thus, if our own creeping totalitarianism is to be headed off at the pass, it could be through rapid, wrenching change directly analogous to the collapse of Communism, unexpected until it is already occurring, but driven by the precise mechanisms that Havel identifies. Such change might be peaceful, though my bet is that violence will be involved, since the Left is unlikely to relinquish power as gently as did their Communist cousins. Think 1789, not 1989.

Beyond living in the truth, what does fighting back consist of? Keeping the focus on Havel, he discusses in passing the “parallel structures” suggested by Václav Benda, “perhaps the most mature stage” up to that date of living within the truth. Havel is somewhat negative; “responsibility is ours; we must accept it and grasp it here, now, in this place in time and space where the Lord has set us down.” By this he means that an inward or perpendicular turn is not the right move; we must move in the same direction as the rest of society, but divert the flow. A “parallel polis . . . only makes sense as an act of deepening one’s responsibility to and for the whole, as an act of discovering the most appropriate locus for this responsibility, not as an escape from it.” This is a topic for another day (I recently bought a copy of Benda’s *The Long Night of the Watchman*, newly re-released, a sign of the times), but Benda’s advocacy of a parallel society, not isolated or retreating, but offering an alternative entire form of social existence, is very similar to Rod Dreher’s Benedict Option. Perhaps that is a reasonable choice.

But as I have said before, I don’t think such parallel structures will be permitted—Central European Communism allowed each individual nearly free reign in the purely private sphere, as long as he conformed as did the greengrocer. I expect that as long as it exists, today’s Cthulhu State, with more power and more reason to intrude, having seen what happened to the power of the Communist states, its predecessor and ideological compatriots, when they permitted a private sphere to exist, will instead act to crush such parallel structures. In particular, technology permits that in way not possible in the 1970s, even at the same time it permits more flexible and easier resistance, and seeing how the internet ecosystem has developed, a smart person would not bet on the

insurgents winning the technological battle. In that scenario, the West will either become, more and more, a distasteful blend of Huxleyite and Orwellian dystopias, or its powerful ruling class will itself be shattered, and not by spiritual forces or merely by the example of living within the truth, but by lead and RDX. Whatever the future holds, as classical liberalism dies, a fate inevitable in retrospect, and repression of thought surges, this book has taken on renewed importance. It rewards careful study, to understand the wellsprings of totalitarianism, then and now.