
Václav Havel (1936–2011): Remarks on Havel's 'Lay Sociology'

How splendid, refreshing, invigorating it is when a person can say that he or she doesn't understand this world, agonises over it, wonders at it and can make no sense of it.

Václav Havel, *Europe and the World* [Havel 2007: 165]

Much has been written and many speeches given since the death of Václav Havel in December 2011—by political leaders, philosophers, regional politicians, and even by those from whom one would not normally have expected it. Allow me to cite one such 'unexpected', albeit not unusual, opinion here, expressed by the classical performer and opera singer Bernarda Fink: 'Václav Havel had a vision, he knew what he wanted and he pursued that vision unconditionally to the very end. And in doing so he moved an entire nation. This is wondrous! We admire the Czech nation for such figures. I hope his soul long remains alive with you.' [Fink 2012: 8] Bernarda Fink seems to be articulating a common opinion, a view of Havel 'from the outside' as the kind of charismatic and unifying figure who—once departed—comes to symbolise the enduring values that he or she so strongly articulated and resolutely insisted upon.

But that is one, however legitimate, way of looking at things. Havel both was and was not the 'President unifier': while no one ever essentially questioned his initiatory social, political and intellectual role before 1989, his performance as President was not viewed nearly as unequivocally—and there were both valid and wholly irrational reasons as to why. Havel was well aware of this—he saw politics as a 'horizon', in that we move towards certain goals but can never ultimately attain them, and consequently nor can we ever entirely satisfy those who attach some concrete objective to politics that is then only partially or never fulfilled. He once said himself that 'gratitude and politics do not mix'. And when he bade the public farewell at the end of his Presidency, he quite forthrightly said: 'I've often backed what was clearly the minority view and reaped scorn instead of recognition. I've sometimes erred greatly in such cases. . . . To all those whom I disappointed in some way, who disagreed with my actions, or whom I simply annoyed, I extend my sincere apologies, and I believe they will forgive me.' [Havel 2007: 238]. Well, they didn't forgive him, or else there never could have emerged a multitude so unified by animosity, though otherwise socially amorphous and intellectually impotent (deprived of Havel's vision!), a multitude united only by aversion to Havel's words about the 'truth and love that must win out over lies and hate'.

This, however, is not altogether new. Back when Havel was a dissident and was writing what is probably his most famous essay, *The Power of the Power-*

less [Havel 2010], Petr Rezek took issue with Havel's perhaps best-known metaphor about the grocer who, among his apples and onions, puts out a sign reading 'Proletarians of the world unite!' However fond we became of Havel's grocer, the passage of time seems to have proved Rezek to be 'sociologically' more correct. For Havel, the only motive behind the grocer's objectively pointless act is a display of obedience motivated by fear, or at the very least anxiety: I, grocer XY, know what I have to do, I behave as is expected of me, and for that I have the right to a quiet life. The grocer's real 'expression of loyalty', however, has an overlapping meaning: the grocer cannot after all display the statement 'I'm afraid so I obey'. So he has this 'proletarian marker', which does not represent his interest in 'uniting the proletarians of the world', but simply his fears and anxieties about holding on to his quiet life. Rezek's main dispute is with Havel's notion of some kind of 'all-consuming fear' behind the grocer's action, and he argues that it is not a matter of fear but of simple convention: just as we greet people, like a disagreeable landlady or a member of the neighbourhood Communist Party Committee, without meaning to show that we like them, so too we put up this 'ornament' that we've been given by Party officials. We follow the 'convention' of putting the sign in the display window and don't then give it another thought. So far this is no great divergence of interpretations, but Rezek rightly understood that it was not by hanging out the sign that the grocer said something but by *not* hanging it out that he did [Rezek 1991: 95]. However, Rezek then goes even further. He wants to 'defend the grocer's honour' against Havel's moral maximalism and rigour, and in a sense he's right, or at least he is in the realistic sense of seeing 'things the way they are' and not the way we wish they were or wish they worked: 'Havel is like the healer of the nation or of all humanity. Even psychiatry has witnessed attempts to establish a link between health and authenticity. Only those who resist "living a lie" can be healthy, but then almost all of humankind would require treatment.' [Rezek 1991: 101]

Havel was not naive and he was well aware of the snares and pitfalls of 'late democratic' society, which produces the kind of person 'who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilisation', and who has 'no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own survival' [Havel 1990: 62]. He would certainly not have accepted (or not entirely) Fromm's 'therapy' for a sick society, but he might have at least partly identified with his diagnosis and optimism that 'we are not lost' if we can keep coming up with alternatives [Fromm (1956) 1990]. While 'hope' is a key word in Havel's humanitarian vision for the society of the future, he never posed as an almighty shaman, living unerringly in truth and herding people onwards towards the Eden of some kind of 'better society': 'for many people I'm a constant source of hope, and yet I'm always succumbing to depressions, uncertainties, and doubts, and I'm constantly having to look hard for my own inner hope . . . so that I scarcely seem to have any to give away' [Havel 1990: 204]. And finally, although Havel could certainly not be called a radical individualistic liberal, he does place exceptional emphasis on personal responsibility, for oneself

and for others (and in this he resembles Zygmunt Bauman [cf. Bauman 2004]): 'If you wish to sacrifice your freedom for our common life, you may. If I wish to sacrifice my life, I may. But neither you nor I have any right to compel anyone else to do it, or not to ask him and simply to sacrifice his life.' [Havel 1990: 102] But that's not how a 'healer of nations and humanity', as Rezek described Havel, would talk. You really won't find any other '20th-century healers of humanity', be it Lenin, Mussolini, Stalin, or Hitler, admitting to 'depressions, uncertainties, and doubts'. There is a great humanity in Havel's admission: the people who opposed him were those very members of the human race who, in Havel's words, compel others to sacrifice their lives without even asking them first.

Ergo, if anyone wants to turn Havel's stance on life, society and the 'panacea' for all humanity into a kitschy image of a guardian angel guiding good little kiddies across a footbridge suspended over a great abyss they do so out of ignorance or prejudice. Nevertheless, in Czech society if there is mention of kitsch it's as an aesthetic phenomenon usually more associated with Milan Kundera than Hermann Broch or Theodor W. Adorno. Kundera expresses his notion of kitsch as 'How nice to be moved, together with all mankind' [1984: 251], (Kundera refers to this as the 'second tear': the first tear is shed for what truly moves us, the second for when we are moved by the fact that we are moved), and it has become notoriously well known: 'The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. . . . And no one knows this better than politicians. . . . Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all political parties and movements.' [Kundera 1984: 251] Kundera never reproached Havel for the 'kitchiness' of his belief in what he called the 'existential revolution' and regarded as the prerequisite for 'a radical renewal of the relationship of human beings to what I have called the human order, which no political order can replace' [Havel 2010: 50]. But once long ago they were indeed at loggerheads over a much more serious issue than distinguishing between 'fear' and 'conformity' (or 'convention'), over something that in lay terms is called 'national character' and in scholarly terms 'national self-stereotyping'. In *The Lot of the Czechs* (*Český úděl*, written in late 1968), Kundera expressed great praise for how the 'nation' (mainly students) conducted itself during the 'friendly occupation' and especially during the first days of invasion by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, and he voiced his deep conviction that a nation that endures and persists and is moreover endowed with 'a healthy, genuine vein of criticism' has the right to be fully confident in itself. In this polemic with Kundera, Havel noted that his text belonged 'to that tradition of self-admiring visions of national awakening from which the author is so energetically distancing himself' [Havel 1990: 193]. Havel is almost mockingly (and untypically) harsh when he puts Kundera's 'pseudo-critical illusionism' in an international context: by demanding something that most of the civilised world can take for granted (freedom of expression and the press), we [Czechs] are not and could not be at the 'centre of world history' and at best are 'smug schmucks risible in our provincial messianism' [ibid.: 198]. To be a bit puckish it could be said that Kun-

dera himself created the truest political kitsch—unknowingly and inadvertently, but that's always the way kitsch works.

There is a more important purpose to recalling this dispute. It shows Havel as a 'morally rigorous' man, but also as one who had an understanding of the way things really are without descending to a Realpolitik outlook. Perhaps it was from this Realpolitik approach that the President made several mistakes (something the President of a democratic state can and may do), of which he was fully aware. Of greater interest, however, is the conflict over unpolitical politics,¹ when his opponents and critics accused him of running away not just from Realpolitik but even from Parliamentary politics, something that was almost—implicitly—equated with a betrayal of democracy.² Havel didn't invent the idea of 'unpolitical politics'; it had a prior great advocate in the person of T. G. Masaryk, the founder of Czechoslovakia. Masaryk had two primary concerns: that political life in the state or country not become factionalised into typically unproductive clashes between the interests of small groups, and that politics not be exempted from the sphere of moral judgement. In Masaryk's words, 'it is understandable that political parties emphasise their opposition, but beyond this opposition there is an economic solidarity of classes organised into political parties. I believe that with the requisite political education parties will understand that they do not just stand opposite each other but also side by side, and that therefore they must cooperate politically' [Masaryk (1926) 1994: 179]. And even more radically: 'problems are solved not just by people who are elected but by people who think. That's what it's about!' [ibid.: 327]. And finally: 'Democracy is more than just the mechanism of Parliament and elections, it is the shared enjoyment and constitutional defence of freedom' [Masaryk (1930) 1994: 139]. Masaryk does not actually mention civil society, but his whole concept of democracy was a concept of a civil, not a partisan, society. Those 'people who think' and are not just elected are the guardians of morality in democratic society, which is not and cannot be immune to all too human vices. Masaryk knew about the things that we are suffering today and brooding about as though they had never existed here before (and certainly not 'in Masaryk's day'), the lies, the corruption, the growing rich off public property. 'We shan't disguise the fact that there are people in this country who abuse their public position in order to live comfortably and grow rich without working. Corruption is rightly tried in court. However, if someone is corrupt or is an aid to corruption, it is in the interest of the state that that person be removed.' [Masaryk (1931) 1994: 222] A similar opinion was held by Masaryk's less fortunate successor, Edvard Beneš, who had justifiable concerns about the fragmentation of the state through parties even while the government was still in exile during the war.

¹ 'Unpolitical politics' is a term that was first used in Czech by T. G. Masaryk in a letter to Karel Havlíček in 1896 [cf. Masaryk 1996: 301].

² Years later Havel recalled: 'Here and there various sourpusses would take aim at me, later I became their target, and "unpolitical politics", a term that was used in connection with me, became a popular insult.' [Havel 2006: 142]

Havel was not a conscious disciple of Masaryk, but he intuitively felt and as President clearly saw that, although democracy is impossible without parties, its legitimacy does not derive from the party structure, regardless of what kind of structure: the focal point of work within a democracy is centred on semiformal and informal structures, voluntary associations and independent initiatives, because without them democracy is nothing more than Parliamentary theatre, which the voter will gaze at hopelessly wondering—who in heaven's sake have we elected? Havel wanted to defend democracy against its radical critics, which in fact included figures like Vilfredo Pareto, who identified democracy with a plutocracy in which anything can be bought for money, which is why in essence it is about the economic competition for financial resources [Pareto 2011: 23–94], or Carl Schmitt, who progressed from criticism of Parliamentary democracy to more or less pure National Socialism [Schmitt (1923) 2000]. Havel's adversaries, however, were not Pareto or Schmitt but his own contemporaries, who tried with all their might to force civil society out onto the very margins of society and, if possible, to strip it of any legitimate right to a publicly expressed opinion, or in the words of Jiří Přibáň, a Czech legal philosopher based in the UK, 'to engage not in politics but anti-politics, a dangerous denial of politics that involves trying to turn a democratic people into a national mob' [Přibáň 2012: 551].

Although Havel was not quite able to sustain his concept of moral and incorrupt politics, what remained alive was his ability, even way back when he was allowed absolutely no right to a 'public voice', to recognise the threats to modern democracy. In a study titled 'Václav Havel and Sociology', Jiří Musil very sensitively discerned Havel's sociological contribution as 'the courage to call the waning phase of the post-totalitarian system³ one variant of the total failure of modern humanity. Havel proceeded from analysing Czech society in the 1970s to interpreting contemporary Western societies in general. He spoke about consumer, industrial, and post-industrial society, which he described as being in a state of intellectual, moral, political, and social privation.' [Musil 2012: 160]

There is an abundance of evidence for Musil's claim that Havel was an equally radical critic of declining Western democracy as of declining real socialism. To illustrate, 'the hierarchy of values existing in the developed countries of the West has, in essence, appeared in our society (the long period of co-existence with the West has only hastened this process). In other words, what we have here is simply another form of the consumer and industrial society with all its concomitant social, intellectual, and psychological consequences.' [Havel 2010: 3] In Havel's view, 'the post-totalitarian system has been built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and consumer society' [ibid.: 12]. Years later Havel noted that his claim was actually a presentiment of future development: 'but one thing surprises and pleases me most: the ideas that occur

³ 'Post-totalitarian system' is the phrase Havel applied to the last stage of development of 'real socialism'.

to me today I can find in texts I wrote fifty years ago' [Havel 2006: 242]. Perhaps the developments since 1989 only reinforced Havel's aversion to what sociology refers to as the 'unintended consequences' of deliberate actions [Boudon 1993], in particular (and by no accident) to the moral and environmental devastation caused by consumer society—unintentionally, of course. To his final days Havel harboured an almost obsessive aversion to fast food, to environmental damage to the landscape caused by economic motives that never yield adequate economic and human benefits, to the never-ending merry-go-round of exporting apples to Denmark and then importing their apples (and of course all the other types of goods this applies to, which among other things destroys local agriculture and leaves motorways in need of constant repairs), and finally an aesthetically grounded distaste for the construction of the giant 'mega-stores' and mega-warehouses that surround cities today. In this Havel was truly not favourably inclined towards the rule of 'free market forces', which is why he never accepted the simple and thus seductive equation:

Parliamentary democracy + market economy = functioning state + happy citizens.

His equation, if we were to try to formulate one, would be much more complex, ultimately because his whole way of thinking about and reflecting on society and the human fate was much more complex than a macro-economic curve or the GDP formula: 'I see a renewed focus of politics on real people as something far more profound than merely returning to the everyday mechanisms of western (or if you like bourgeois) democracy.' [Havel 2010: 50] Perhaps that's why after 1989 we so quickly joined in with the anticipation of the arrival of supermarkets and forgot about the warning Havel issued still in the days of waning 'real socialism': 'And in the end, is not the greyness and the emptiness of life in the post-totalitarian system only an inflated caricature of modern life in general? And do we not in fact stand (although in the external measures of civilization, we are far behind) as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies?' [Havel 2010: 12]

The quotation beneath the title of this text is not self-stylisation on Havel's part. Havel was always modest and polite and conducted himself impeccably, but he was unreservedly critical if there was a more general point to it, regardless of the consequences. He was more erudite than many academic scholars and he was capable of exceptionally penetrating thought.⁴ So we should have heeded

⁴ There is no question that Havel's thinking changed over time. He was only partly influenced by Heidegger, which was otherwise a common influence among Czech dissidents. He remained more firmly anchored in the traditions of the late Enlightenment. Ascribing Havel's ontology of human rights—which sometimes makes slightly imprecise use of such terms as 'absolute horizon' or 'order of being'—a direct connection with the New Age movement is somewhat superficial [cf. Hauser 2009].

much sooner Havel's prediction that, while the West would not follow us into our old moral marasmus, we should not automatically copy everything we see in so-called advanced democracies. Now that we are a natural part of the democratic world we should remember Havel's call for an 'existential revolution' as the essential precondition to establishing of a firm moral foundation for modern democracy. Havel was not a shallow moraliser; he was a great moral authority. It is not easy for moral authorities to live in this postmodern world. However, Havel's fulfilled fate is a sign that no fight should be abandoned as lost from the start.

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