

Václav Havel's reflection on freedom and human identity in contemporary context

La reflexión de Václav Havel sobre la libertad y la identidad humana en el contexto contemporáneo

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Abstract

Václav Havel (1936-2011) is a key figure of intellectual and political life in Czechoslovakia (later Czech Republic) from the 1960s until his death. Already in his early plays (*The Garden Party*, 1963; *The Memorandum*, 1965 and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, 1968), he focused on the “human condition” of a totalitarian regime: his characters are caught in a net of bureaucratic, dehumanizing relations defined by hackneyed phrases and alienated “in-human” language. The seeming “complexity” of the “system” marks the fundamental impossibility of free human expression and leads to an ever-growing dissolution of human identity. Havel’s further work, esp. his one-act plays of the 1970s, intensifies this focus. In his Vaněk plays – *Audience* (1975), *Unveiling* (1975) and *Protest* (1978), the fundamental situation is a conflict between a sense of inner identity and inner freedom on the part of the main protagonist and the incomprehension of those who accepted the status quo and gave up their freedom and identity for the “permitted joys” of an essentially consumerist late Communist Czechoslovak society. Once elected President, in a tumultuous period of post-Communist transformation, Havel repeatedly thematised the link between freedom and human identity: the temptations of a hedonistic and narcissistic society as well as the prefabricated language of post-Communist populism reduce the meaning of authentic human freedom. For Havel, freedom is not only freedom *from* something (oppression, poverty, or the mendacity of the Communist “system”) but above all freedom *for* a unique human identity, for unique contribution(s) of different cultures; freedom for creativity, innovation and peace. The paper focuses on the fundamental link between freedom and human identity in Havel’s thought and its relevance in the 21st century.

Key words: Václav Havel, concepts of freedom, totalitarianism, ideology, authentic existence

Resumen

Václav Havel (1936-2011) es una figura clave de la vida política e intelectual en Checoslovaquia (luego República Checa) desde los años 60 y hasta su muerte. Ya en sus obras tempranas (*The Garden Party*, 1963; *The Memorandum*, 1965 y *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, 1968), se focalizó en la “condición humana” del régimen totalitario:

*sus personajes están atrapados en una red de relaciones burocráticas y deshumanizantes definidas por frases trilladas y lenguaje “deshumanizado”. La aparente “complejidad” del “sistema” marca la imposibilidad fundamental de la expresión humana libre y lleva a una siempre creciente disolución de la identidad humana. El trabajo siguiente de Havel, especialmente sus obras de un solo acto de los 70, intensifica este foco. En sus obras *Vaněk* -Audience (1975), *Unveiling* (1975) y *Protest* (1978), la situación fundamental es un conflicto entre una sensación de identidad interna y libertad interna por parte del protagonista, y la incomprensión de quienes aceptaron el status quo y abandonaron su libertad e identidad a cambio de las “alegrías permitidas” de una sociedad esencialmente consumista de la Checoslovaquia Comunista. Una vez que fue electo presidente, en un período tumultuoso de transformación post-comunista, Havel tematizó reiteradamente el vínculo entre la libertad y la identidad humana: las tentaciones de una sociedad hedonista y narcisista, así como el lenguaje prefabricado del populismo post-comunista reducen el significado de la auténtica libertad humana. Para Havel, la libertad no es sólo la libertad de algo (opresión, pobreza, la mendicidad del “sistema” comunista) sino sobre todo la libertad para una identidad humana única, para contribuciones de diferentes culturas; libertad para la creatividad, la innovación y la paz. Este artículo se focaliza en el vínculo fundamental entre la libertad y la identidad humana en el pensamiento de Havel y su relevancia en el siglo 21.*

Palabras clave: *Václav Havel, conceptos de libertad, totalitarismo, ideología, existencia auténtica*

Development

When we first discussed the basic framework of my paper for a conference on “writing” and “liberty” at my university in České Budějovice in the south of the Czech Republic, I spontaneously came up with the idea of analyzing some of the key aspects of the work of **Václav Havel** (1936-2011). There are two main reasons for that choice: the first is primarily *cultural and geographical*, because his work reflects on the specific political and cultural development of my home country, the other is *more personal*. For my generation, born in the shabby wasteland of communist Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel was much more than a symbol of heroic resistance against totalitarian oppression; as a writer, he taught us to use language as a means of *free expression*; as a means of *communication and interaction* in a world of indoctrination and ideologically manipulated falsehood. For me and the generation born in the 1970s, Havel had an aura of a fearlessly, one would almost say foolishly free man, who spoke his mind without much speculation as to what that would bring. I can still remember this sense of awe and amazement at the first few sentences of his New Year’s Address to the Nation in 1990:

My dear fellow citizens,

For forty years you heard from my predecessors on this day different variations on the same theme: how our country was flourishing, how many million tons of steel

we produced, how happy we all were, how we trusted our government, and what bright perspectives were unfolding in front of us.

I assume you did not propose me for this office so that I, too, would lie to you.

Our country is not flourishing. The enormous creative and spiritual potential of our nations is not being used sensibly. Entire branches of industry are producing goods that are of no interest to anyone, while we are lacking the things we need. A state which calls itself a workers’ state humiliates and exploits workers. Our obsolete economy is wasting the little energy we have available. A country that once could be proud of the educational level of its citizens spends so little on education that it ranks today as seventy-second in the world. We have polluted the soil, rivers and forests bequeathed to us by our ancestors, and we have today the most contaminated environment in Europe. Adults in our country die earlier than in most other European countries. (Havel 1992, 390)

The sense of amazement may not necessarily be easy to explain today, but for someone whose childhood was marked by a dramatic hiatus between the way you use language at home (i.e. freely, without any imposed restrictions on the choice of words or without any a priori ideological schemes), Havel’s speech was a revelation of a kind. Most Czech

and Slovak children and teenagers in the dying years of communism, i.e. in the second half of the 1980s, were used to the schizophrenic divide between private and public discourse, between what one was told at school and was talked about at home. In fact, only a tiny minority of people had the liberty to speak their mind and thus show us that language does not just perpetuate nonsense and empty ideological doctrines, but that **it actually speaks**: it reveals a reality as it exists in the world of our everyday lived experience. And as such, it has the potential **to generate action, re-action and, indeed, inter-action**.

I am going to start with a shorter biographical note on Havel's life and work in the context of modern Czechoslovak and Czech history, and then move on to analysing some of his key writings, i.e. his major plays, his key essay on the meaning of political dissent called *The power of the powerless* from 1978, and, finally, the course of his reflection in the period after he became President of Czechoslovakia in December 1989 and later, after the breakup of Czechoslovakia, President of the Czech Republic.

Václav Havel first rose to prominence in the 1960s, when he became one of the symbols of the gradual liberation of Czechoslovak society. His early plays – *Zahradní slavnost* (*The Garden Party*, 1963); *Vyrozumění* (*The Memorandum*, 1965) and *Ztížená možnost soustředění* (*The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, 1968), more or less openly thematised what might be classified as **the “human condition” of a totalitarian regime**. The characters of his early plays are caught in a net of bureaucratic, dehumanizing relations defined by hackneyed phrases and alienated “in-human” language. The seeming “complexity” of the “system” (which clearly refers not only to the empty clichés of Communist propaganda, but also to the ever-growing sterility of scientific discourse) alienates human beings from the world of their natural human experience and force them to live in a strange form of permanent schizophrenia.

His earliest major play, *The Garden Party*, is a play focused on the abuse of language: if language ceases to be a means of communication, i.e. it is not meant to establish a communion and provoke reaction, it becomes an alienated structure in which people get trapped, which enslaves and degrades their humanity and their sense of identity (Havel 2010, 9-62). *The Memorandum* (written in 1965) centres around

the implementation of an artificial language, “Ptydepe”, which is to replace everyday language in official documents to avoid possible misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The world of hackneyed, empty phrases which dominate *The Garden Party* moves here into an experiment based on the fundamentally subversive nature of “natural” languages, i.e. their semantic “liquidity”, their changing nature, **their being alive**. A dead, made-up language is to replace the natural dynamics of a natural language (Havel 2010, 65-151). In *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (written in 1968), the alienating machine of modern society is symbolised by the introduction of a robot which is to finally bring order and “scientific” certainty into a disorderly life of an academic. However, the machine is so sensitive that it cannot be properly made to work and so instead of providing meaning and clarity, it, in fact, reflects on the inner dilemma of the main protagonist Eduard Huml. Huml is unable to make up his mind about a number of issues (especially his love life) and so his state of mind strangely mirrors the state of the hypersensitive machine Puzuk or vice versa (Havel 2010, 153-207).

The tension found in those early plays in many ways epitomises the key existential dilemma of Czechoslovak society in the 1960s. After the Communist putsch in 1948, Czechoslovakia was separated from the rest of Western Europe by the so-called Iron Curtain and by the fixed dogmas of its official political ideology, however, its inner social dynamics very much reflected some of the seismic changes taking place in much of the Western world (above all, the crisis of traditionally defined authority, the rise of youth culture and its alternative lifestyles). The reception of the process was very much filtered by the limits set by the political discourse of the day characterized by the constitutionally grounded authority of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, severe censorship, centrally planned economy and – last but not least – the aesthetic forms of the so-called “socialist realism”. Nevertheless, the crust of dogmatic Stalinism started to crumble. The first public demonstration of what later became known as the “Prague Spring” was – not surprisingly – the Congress of the official union of Czech and Slovak writers in June 1967. That was also the moment when some of the future stars of Czech literature, including **Pavel Kohout** (b. 1928), **Václav Havel** (1936-2011), **Milan Kundera** (b. 1929), **Ludvík Vaculík** (1926-2015) and **Ivan**

Klíma (b. 1931) came up with a sweeping critique of the party line and demanded major reforms, including the end of censorship, cultural and political plurality and a fair and unbiased discussion about some of the aspects of Communist rule.

The official reaction to the Congress was hostile, however, the democratization process at that point could no longer be stopped. The election of Alexander Dubček and the Action Programme of the Communist Party ("*Akční program KSČ*") promised a new form of socialism, combining respect for individual freedoms and the need for an open society with all the benefits of socialism, a "**socialism with a human face**", as some of the leaders used to say. However, the paradox of the Prague Spring, i.e. keeping the ideological foundation of the Communist rule on the one hand, and a futile effort of the Party to keep up with the pace of the changes in Czechoslovak reforms unleashed by the *Action Programme*, soon reached a critical point. Only two options finally seemed viable: either to get on with the reforms and undo the ideological grounding of the system completely (by introducing unconditional political plurality) or to introduce a regime which would comply with Leonid Brezhnev's doctrine of "limited sovereignty" for all the countries of the former Soviet bloc.

The tanks of the Warsaw Pact materialized the latter scenario in late August of 1968. However much the population of the country resisted this barbaric act violating the most fundamental principles of international law, a new orthodoxy was gradually being introduced. Interestingly enough, the term used for the process of reestablishing a neo-Stalinist rule in Czechoslovakia was "normalization": the conservative voices in the Communist party (some of whom were given new prominence with the intervention of the Soviets) were slowly spreading a simple, ideological interpretation of the events: look where this sort of unrest and uprising lead to; aren't we better off with just accepting the status quo, given the awkward geopolitical position our country has?

This message succeeded partially because of the bitter experiences my country made in the 20th century as a result of its involvement in the two World Wars. An unforgettable rendering of the absurdities and paradoxes of the Czech experience can be found in the great war novel of Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923) *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka* (*The*

Good Soldier Švejk, 1921). The main protagonist of the novel, Švejk, is an anti-hero who seems to thrive in every régime, no matter what. Švejk doesn't question the world, or its principles; he knows he is just a little man whose "little existence" is prone to being victimized almost by nature. His only chance is a concentrated effort to make as much as possible from the situation in which he finds himself. He couldn't care less about any of the values related to the "great war" of 1914-1918, let alone about a traditionally defined heroism. His inability to "succeed" in an ordinary sense of the word makes him conspicuously immune to failure. Indeed, he neither wins, nor loses. He accepts the fact that the façade of the regime cannot change; he understands that instead of running his head against the wall, he should rather look for various "creative" solutions to everyday problems that the system allows. Ultimately, the only relief he can enjoy is to make fun of it all (Hašek 1974). The Munich syndrome of much of Czech society in the 1960s reflects on the situation prior to the outbreak of WWII, i.e. to the moment, in which the German speaking part of the country (the so-called Sudetenland) was to be torn off from the rest of the country and joined to the Nazi "German Empire".¹ The treaty signed by the Prime Ministers of France, Britain, Italy and Adolf Hitler sealed the fate of the first Czechoslovak republic founded in 1918: the country became truncated and, thus, unable to function as an independent state. Military mobilization declared by the central government to protect the country ended up in demeaning absurdity: soldiers were summoned to the border areas of Sudetenland, but shortly after that – as a result of the Munich ultimatum – were forced to give up their arms to the Germans. Before they took any action at all, they literally lost the ground underneath their feet. A combination of loss, shame and existential fear created a poisonous atmosphere of pragmatic resignation: little could be done in a situation, in which the key players of European politics made the decision for us, but without us, i.e. without even the possibility to protest, or to respond adequately.

Let's now return to the bleak climax of the Prague Spring of 1968. The invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies had an impact on Havel's position in the Writers' Union ("*Svaz spisovatelů*") and on his stature as a respected playwright and public intellectual: all of that was soon to be dismantled.

His plays were banned, his works could no longer be officially published, and his own life was subject to constant harassment of the secret police. The early 1970s was a period of stagnation, a strange form of political and cultural standstill, in which Czechoslovak society gradually adopted a state of silent resignation. The former Prague Spring reformer Gustáv Husák became the symbol of the era of “forgetting”, as it was unforgettably nicknamed by Milan Kundera in his famous 1979 novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (“*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*”). Havel’s letter to President Husák (dated 1975) is a sweeping analysis of this lethargy created by that so-called “normalised” system: the country may create an illusion of economic and political success, since people are back at work, children are born, elections are held, and no protests take place any more. The lavish displays of political approval of the new system, however, conceal a troublesome reality: these forced gestures are – Havel says – not signs of approval, but of capitulation. In fact, people do not identify with the core principles of the system, but they see no real hope that things can change. The only form of dignified survival in such a situation seems to be to withdraw from the political arena and move into one’s own private exile (Havel 1992, 50-83).

The paradoxes of such an existence are reflected in the plays and essays of the 1970s, known as the Vaněk plays, because they all feature the same protagonist, a semi-biographical, shy, dissident intellectual Vaněk. These plays differ from the idiom of the earlier ones because they focus on the microdramas and microdilemmas of “little” people. In his perhaps most frequently staged play from this period, *Audience* from 1975, Havel draws on his own experience of being employed in a brewery in North Bohemia. The play is a dialogue of only 2 actors: Vaněk and the brewmaster. The latter is asked to provide spy reports on Vaněk, but finds it difficult to come up with something relevant, something the secret police would find interesting. He challenges Vaněk to write the reports himself (since he is a writer and knows what “they” want). If Vaněk agrees to do that, he will be promoted to a better position with less manual work. The core problem of the play is that Vaněk fails to explain to the brewmaster that he cannot write spy reports on himself, since it is not a matter of skill, but a matter of principles. The drunken brewmaster gets angry and emotional, because he – unlike the famous dissident Vaněk – is a little man, has

no connections to actors and actresses and other celebrities that Vaněk has. In that sense, he is as much a victim of the system as the “principled” intellectual Vaněk:

You damn it! You intellectuals! VIP’s! All that stuff’s just a smooth bullshit, except that you can afford it, because nothing can ever happen to you, there’s always somebody interested in how you’re doing, you always know how to fix that, you’re still up there, even when you’re down and out, whereas a regular guy like me is busting his ass and he ain’t got shit to show for it and nobody will stick up for him and everybody just fucks him and everybody blows him off and everybody feels free to yell at him and he ain’t got no principles! A soft job in the warehouse, you’d take that from me – but to take along with it a piece of that shit I gotta walk in every damn day, that you don’t wanna! You’re all so goddam smart, you got everything worked out ahead of time, you know exactly how to look out for yourselves! Principles! Principles! Damn right you gonna fight for your damn principles – they’re worth a fortune to you, you know how to sell them, you’re making a killing on them, you’re living off of your damn principles – but what about me? I only get my ass busted for having principles! You always got a chance, but what kind of chance have I got? Nobody’s gonna take care of me, nobody’s afraid of me, nobody’s gonna write about me, nobody’s gonna gimme a hand, nobody’s interested in me, all I’m good for is to be the manure that your damn principles gonna grow out of, and to scare up heated rooms, so you can play heroes! And looking like a damn fool gonna be all I’m gonna have to show for it! You’re gonna go back to all your actresses one day – you gonna floor’em with how you rolled barrels – you gonna be a hero – but what about me? What can I go back to? Who’s ever gonna pay any attention to me? Who’s ever gonna appreciate anything I did? What the hell do I ever get out of life? What’s in store for me? What? (Havel 1990, 24-25)

In that context, the meaning of the text goes well beyond a straightforward morality about a morally upright life in a corrupt system. It is much more a double-edged study of the system in which everyone ultimately ends up being a loser. The conflict over the persecution of the non-conformist

hippie rock band *The Plastic People of the Universe* led Havel and some of the other leading dissident intellectuals of the country, including the philosopher *Jan Patočka* (1907-1977)² to the establishment of Charter 77, a human rights group representing an independent political platform to break the deadening silence of Husák's regime. Havel was not just one of the authors of the first declaration of Charter 77, a year later he wrote one of the memorable texts *The power of the powerless* ("Moc bezmocných"). It is a political essay trying to identify the type of the Czechoslovak political totalitarianism and secondly, as well as the meaning and dignity of dissident-hood.

Havel's essay combines political and philosophical discussion with fresh insights of a writer interested in the ups and downs of concrete human destiny. His analysis ultimately centers on the existential dilemmas of an ordinary person under communism. In many ways, this part of the essay can be read as a commentary on the earlier plays. In other words, this analysis made him a true *homo politicus*: he understands that the crisis of human identity in the latter part of the 20th century is inextricably linked to the crisis of political thought and that totalitarianism is just one of the many blind alleys of modernity. A decent human society needs a pre-political field, i.e. a set of values and principles that allow people and things to be what they are. Once everything becomes political, i.e. when everything gets swallowed by politics, there is no more room for any personal moral responsibility. As George Orwell shows in his *1984*, truth becomes a highly charged political problem. There is nothing simply true or false or right and wrong; such categories are unusable. The core of the system is founded on ideological self-disciplination. Havel analyses this problem on the hypothetical character of a manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop:

The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: "Workers of the world, unite!" Why does he do it? What is he trying to communicate to the world? Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment's thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean? I think it can safely be assumed that

the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because **that is the way it has to be** [my emphasis]. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life "in harmony with society," as they say.

Obviously, the greengrocer is indifferent to the semantic content of the slogan on exhibit; he does not put the slogan in his window from any personal desire to acquaint the public with the ideal it expresses. This, of course, does not mean that his action has no motive or significance at all, or that the slogan communicates nothing to anyone. The slogan is really a sign, and as such it contains a subliminal but very definite message. Verbally, it might be expressed this way: "I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace." This message, of course, has an addressee: it is directed above, to the greengrocers superior, and at the same time it is a shield that protects the greengrocer from potential informers. The slogans real meaning, therefore, is rooted firmly in the greengrocer's existence. It reflects his vital interests. But what are those vital interests? Let us take note: if the greengrocer had been instructed to display the slogan "I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient"; he would not be nearly as indifferent to its semantics, even though the statement would reflect the truth. The greengrocer would be embarrassed and ashamed to put such an unequivocal statement of his own degradation in the shop window, and quite naturally so, for he is a human being and thus has a sense of his own dignity. To overcome this complication, his expression of loyalty must take the form of a sign which, at least on its textual

surface, indicates a level of disinterested conviction. It must allow the greengrocer to say, "What's wrong with the workers of the world uniting?" Thus the sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high. And that something is ideology." (Havel 1978, 5-7)

Ideology thus replaces individual moral accountability: once everyone gets entangled in the system, nobody can take any blame for such humiliating acts of loyalty. Amongst other things, this situation creates an unbearable crisis of signification, because everyday human interaction is void of real human energy, seriousness and responsibility. The very core of a totalitarian system is a profound **alienation**: the greengrocer does not identify with the actual meaning of the words he displays in the window shop, he just shields himself from the difficulties arising from possible dissent. He himself ceases to communicate, he just agrees to let the sign dominate his existence. He is obedient and that is the only personal and – perhaps – moral and personal justification he needs in his life. The power of the powerless dissidents – Havel says – is thus in their fundamental, pre-political existential choice **to live in truth, not in a lie**, to state what they think, regardless the consequences that such an act (or acts) may have. Being a dissident in a repressive regime means to opt for the truth of one's own existence, to keep the freedom to communicate who I am, not what something or somebody wants me to be. It is a matter of spiritual hygiene and inner liberation. Such a decision thus has **a real moral significance** because it recognizes the intrinsic value of authentic human existence:

Individuals can be alienated from themselves only because there is something in them to alienate. The terrain of this violation is their authentic existence. Living the truth is thus woven directly into the texture of living a lie. It is the repressed alternative, the authentic aim to which living a lie is an inauthentic response. Only against this background does living a lie make any sense: it exists because of that background. In its excusatory, chimerical rootedness in the human order, it is a response to nothing other than the human predisposition to truth. Under the orderly surface of the life of lies, therefore, there slumbers the hidden sphere

of life in its real aims, of its hidden openness to truth. (Havel 1978, 20)

The fundamental form of human freedom is thus this freedom for this **existential truth**, for an integral human development, for a unique human identity that can be neither swallowed, nor fully exhausted by any ideological, philosophical systematisation. The potential of human communication can be realised only if it is fundamentally linked and informed by a naturally lived experience.

Havel draws heavily on Heideggerian existentialism and his analyses of authentic and inauthentic existence. In an "authentic" existence, there is never an option to delegate the burden of one's existential dilemmas onto someone else. The German grammatical concept of a non-personal "man", as in "**das macht man so**", "**das sagt man so**" etc. translates as "the They" in English: i.e. "they do it this way", "so they say" etc. However, this is the fundamental existential falsehood, since my existence does not belong to the world of *things*. Heidegger analyses the Greek idea of truth ALETHEIA and says that its etymological meaning is **disclosure: the truth discloses** (Heidegger 1972, 70). Indeed, the ability to communicate the simple truth of your life has become **a heroic deed in a world, in which everything has become poisoned by ideology**. Moreover, this fundamental existential choice saves the basic framework of naturally experienced human life communicated in a language has not – as Shakespeare says in *Sonnet 66* – been "tongue-tied by authority":

If living within the truth in the post-totalitarian system becomes the chief breeding ground for independent, alternative political ideas, then all considerations about the nature and future prospects of these ideas must necessarily reflect this moral dimension as a political phenomenon. (And if the revolutionary Marxist belief about morality as a product of the "superstructure" inhibits any of our friends from realizing the full significance of this dimension and, in one way or another, from including it in their view of the world, it is to their own detriment: an anxious fidelity to the postulates of that world view prevents them from properly understanding the mechanisms of their own political influence, thus paradoxically making them precisely what they, as Marxists, so often suspect others of being—victims of "false consciousness.") (Havel 1978, 25-26)

Havel showed that the situation of East European Communist dictatorships revealed much more about the situation of humanity at the turn of the 21st century: i.e. a situation in which ideology and technology have invaded even the most sacred sanctuary of our being, our conscience, and thus our moral integrity. The transcendental horizon of our existence has disappeared, and the concept of hope has been reordered and projected into the technological attempt to seize control over everything, including our own deep sense of a unique human identity:

The specific nature of post-totalitarian conditions—with their absence of a normal political life and the fact that any far-reaching political change is utterly unforeseeable—has one positive aspect: it compels us to examine our situation in terms of its deeper coherences and to consider our future in the context of global, long range prospects of the world of which we are a part. The fact that the most intrinsic and fundamental confrontation between human beings and the system takes place at a level incomparably more profound than that of traditional politics would seem, at the same time, to determine as well the direction such considerations will take. Our attention, therefore, inevitably turns to the most essential matter: the crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole, the crisis that Heidegger describes as the ineptitude of humanity face to face with the planetary power of technology. Technology—that child of modern science, which in turn is a child of modern metaphysics—is out of humanity's control, has ceased to serve us, has enslaved us and compelled us to participate in the preparation of our own destruction. And humanity can find no way out: we have no idea and no faith, and even less do we have a political conception to help us bring things back under human control. We look on helplessly as that coldly functioning machine we have created inevitably engulfs us, tearing us away from our natural affiliations (for instance, from our habitat in the widest sense of that word, including our habitat in the biosphere) just as it removes us from the experience of Being and casts us into the world of "existences." This situation has already been described from many different angles and many individuals and social groups have sought, often painfully, to find ways

out of it (for instance, through oriental thought or by forming communes). The only social, or rather political, attempt to do something about it that contains the necessary element of universality (responsibility to and for the whole) is the desperate and, given the turmoil the world is in, fading voice of the ecological movement, and even there the attempt is limited to a particular notion of how to use technology to oppose the dictatorship of technology. (Havel 1978, 72-73)

Towards the end of the essay Havel refers to Alexander Solzhenitzyn's 1978 Harvard lecture, where he analyses the *"illusory nature of freedoms not based on personal responsibility and the chronic inability of the traditional democracies, as a result, to oppose violence and totalitarianism"*. He believes in the necessity of an existential revolution carrying out a new moral consciousness in order to establish a *"'human order', which no political order can replace."* This requires *"rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love"*, i.e. pre-political values which are the *conditio sine qua non* of any politically bearable system on this planet (Havel 1978, 74-76).

Once Havel became President in 1990, he repeatedly referred to the necessity to understand political freedom **not as a goal unto itself, but as an instrument of a more profound human development**. He advocated the rise of a civil society and a pluralistic vision of a world, in which the political space cannot be monopolised by a single discourse, a society which respects the incredible variety of human needs and their unique "pursuits" of happiness, to use an expression from the American Constitution. "Freedom from" the alienating force of political, technological and other totalitarianisms is above all a pre-requisite for a "freedom for" "being", for readiness to face our irreplaceable human responsibility and the burden and challenges of the future. American moral and social philosopher **Eric Hoffer** (1898-1983) once said that *"When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other."* Havel warned against the danger to reduce the concept of freedom to only to the concept of "freedom from", because our freedom allows us to live in the unique truth of our own existence. We are free to make sense of the world, to create and to love. In one of his most memorable quotes, Havel says that *"Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but*

the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." (Havel 1991, 181) I sincerely hope that this conference is a good opportunity to hope for the future, to speak the truth, and to help us live in truth. That would ultimately follow what Václav Havel understood as the central mission of his life.

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Endnotes

¹ The historical context and implications of the Munich Treaty on Czechoslovak society and Czech nationalism have been recently themetised in Chad Bryant's book *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (2009).

² His major works have recently been translated into English, German and French. In relation to Patočka's impact on Havel, two works are especially important: *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem* (orig. *Přirozený svět jako filozofický problém*) and *Body, Community, Language, World* (orig. *Tělo, společenství, jazyk, svět*).