

# Politics as Poetry: The Political Thought of Václav Havel

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses the political thought of Václav Havel, a playwright and politician who dedicated his life to restore human values like freedom, autonomy, and truth in Czech society. Havel criticises the totalitarianism, especially the communist regime which sank Czechoslovakia into a quagmire for almost a half of century. From poetry to politics, he demonstrates the concepts of his theories, as well as the practice of these principles in the political environment. The main contribution of Havelian thought is the sense of civic responsibility to live in truth. The persecution of this objective pass through the reconquest of human identity, that allow the individual emancipation by citizenship. This is the only way to rebuild a moral dimension of political life. Moreover, the approach undertaken is a qualitative research based on bibliography analysis of books and papers about Václav Havel to analyse his acts as writer, dissident, revolutionary and president. Nevertheless, realising the fact that most of the sources is limited to subjects of political science, philosophy, and history, it is endorsed that the way to study this theme relates to the mentioned areas, which requires a systematic investigation about the topic.

**Keywords.** Václav Havel, Political Thought, Totalitarianism, Democracy, Czechoslovakia.

## 1. Introduction

Václav Havel was a Czech playwright and politician. He was one of the main character responsible for the re-democratization of Czechoslovakia at the end of Cold War. Havel was also a source of inspiration for other leaders, people and countries that dream to free themselves from autocracies. He gave us a civic and democratic heritage that needs to be preserved and transmitted.

The Czech celebrity dedicated his life to the cause of liberty by adopting a perspective based on “civic responsibility”. Searching by the “power of the powerless” restoration, he harshly criticized the autocratic regime that plagued Czechoslovakia for almost half a century. During the decades which Prague was subordinated to Kremlin rules — as a USSR’s satellite — Havel strove to restore the human dignity of Czechoslovak people.

In 1989, when Soviet Union was already doomed to failure, Havel stood out for his notorious role in the Velvet Revolution, an event that marked the end of Soviet domain in Czechoslovakia. The mentioned revolution represents the transition from communism to liberal democracy — centralism and collectivism were overcome in favour of an open society and a free market economy. These changes were led and negotiated peacefully by Havel, who

became president after the success of the bloodless Velvet Revolution.

From poetry to politics, Havel has always valued the importance of “living in truth”. By this exegesis, he infers those totalitarian regimes, such as communism, are captives of their own lies, being incompatible with the essence of individuals who yearn for freedom, dignity, beauty, and truth. Totalitarianism can only be overthrown when individuals refuse to live under lies and begin to act through a disposition attached on the sense of “civic responsibility”, the only way to live in truth.

The concept of “live in truth” is attached on an ethical and aesthetical perspective of life. In Havel’s opinion, politics needs to walk through a moral perspective, capable to unify immanent and transcendent dimension. It is a way to promote the reunion of the man with his soul. Besides politics, Havel has a huge philosophical apparatus which is present in various dimensions of human life and knowledge areas.

Havel is an example for all people and countries that struggle every day for freedom. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the political thought of Václav Havel. Themes like democracy and autocracy are recurrent in this work. In the present paper, we also highlight the influences of Havel’s ideas in politics, analysing his role as writer,

dissident, revolutionary and president.

The methodology here followed is a qualitative research based on bibliography analysis of the selected books and papers. The chosen texts include a multifaceted dimension of the phenomena through the view of political science, philosophy, and history. The main works mentioned are *Comrades: A History of World Communism*, by Robert Service; *The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism, and some Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, by Vladmir Tismaneanu; *The Totalitarian Spectrum*, by Alexandre Nogueira Souza and Marcelo Marques Araújo. Furthermore, we also analyse some texts written by Václav Havel, such as a political essay called *The Power of the Powerless*, the anti-totalitarian *Letters to Olga* and the play named *The Garden Party*. In order to complement this study, the bibliographical books about Havel are mentioned, like *Havel: A Life*, by Michael Zantovsky; and *Václav Havel: Civic Responsibility in the Postmodern Age*; by James Pontuso. The article is divided in two topics. First of all, Havel's political thought is studied. Last but not least, Havel's political acts as dissident, revolutionary and president are demonstrated. This approach is justified because it facilitates a multidimensional comprehension about the case, it is possible to establish connections between the texts and the various knowledge areas.

The political thought of Václav Havel can be spread as a true example for academics, politicians and all citizens who want to develop a democratic system and a free society. Using the "civic responsibility" as a disposition to "live in truth" — one of the striking points theorised by Havel — an antidote against totalitarianism is placed inside the heart of all individuals who carry the light of freedom.

## 2. Václav Havel: Context, Thought and Ideas

Havel's political thought is built on an intellectual and spiritual search for the meaning of life. Inspired by Kafka, Masaryk, Patocka and Grossman, he emphasises ethical questions in the society, which lost attributes like faith and humanity. Apparently, the mankind is dominated by a bureaucratic apparatus full of rationalism, technically and technology. The world is banning the transcendental dimension, the man is far from all kinds of experiences attached on ethics, aesthetics, and divinity (1).

Even in a democratic regime, the rationalist and bureaucratic mind persists. People are preoccupied only with immanent questions, while a truly bearable life can only be assured by a humanity capable to look beyond this world, which relates with absolute and eternity. Otherwise, when we dedicated all our forces to develop the "world of forms" — using a Plato's term — we bring desolation and dye immanent dimension with blood (2 p384).

Thinking about the salvation of immanent world,

men are destroying not only transcendental aspects of life, but also the world where they inhabit (2). According to Havel, totalitarianism is the pinnacle of this practice, such as the time that Czechoslovakia was closed behind the Iron Curtain.

Totalitarianism relates to a spiritual and moral crisis of the contemporary man. This problem was reported by Weber and Husserl before nazi-fascism and communism. A disenchantment perception about the world contributes to the rise of impersonality and technocratically way of life, that precedes totalitarian regimes criticised by Havel (2).

Before totalitarian experiences, mankind was swallowed by Kantian idealism, Hegelian subjectivism, Benthanian utilitarianism, Marxist materialism, and Nietzschean nihilism. These ideas crush individual autonomy. Maybe, these great philosophers, projecting the individuals as titan of the world, contribute to empty moral, ethical and aesthetical perceptions, separating human being from his own being (3).

The intellectual and social context of Central Europe was crucial to Havel develop his political thought. Face with the ills of his epoch, Havel re-established an important notion developed by Masaryk, called "live in truth". This concept connects ethics and politics by a restoration of spiritual values (not religious values) present in human life. It is the resumption of the transcendent in an immanent dimension, seeking the completeness of human being (3).

Havel concern about the individual's soul, but the contemporary individuals lost the capacity to connect with themselves. They succumb to idealism, subjectivism, utilitarianism, materialism, and nihilism (3). The meaning of life was emptied, once the transcendental dimension attached on ethics and aesthetics was replaced by "modern" ideologies whose separate the man of his soul.

A moral basis is present in Havel's political thought. He did not separate moral and politics — as Machiavelli did in Renascence. The public ethics of politics is interconnected with the private ethics of individuals, reflecting a sense of civic responsibility in society, and one sustain the other. In Havel's perception, it is possible to link both, likewise immanent and transcendent dimensions of the world.

After this contextualization about Havel's thought, this paper will also analyse the aspects of Havel's political thought, especially the ideas present in "The Garden Party" and "The Power of the Powerless". This topic is important to understand an overall view about his framework, because Havel's philosophy has directly influence in his plays, essays, and political acts.

### 2.1 Learning Politics by Metaphors

In order to give our first steps toward Havel's thought, we will start the journey by a play, walking

from poetry to politics. In 1963, Havel has published a play named "The Garden Party". Through this work of dramaturgy, Havel express his discontents with the communist regime. Let see what Havel — as a playwright — think about it.



**Fig 1** - Václav Havel.

By portraying reality through art, the play tells the life of Hugo Pludek, a young middle-class born and raised during an autocratic regime. Hugo's parents, concerned about his professional career, promoted a meeting between their son and the influential Mr. Kalabis. Meanwhile, this renowned citizen could not attend, because he was going to a garden party, which was organised by a political institution called Liquidation Office (4 pp4,10).

Hugo's parents sent the young man to the party too. When Hugo got there, he did not find Mr. Kalabis, but quickly he started to talk with the people and realise several absurdities in terms of conversation and behaviour (4 pp11,12). The members of the Office were speaking through an ideologized and modified language — totally automatized and devoid of sense. Hugo was corrupted by the environment and lost his autonomy. He spoke *clichés* and reinforce the ideological slogans, which led him to a prestigious position inside the Office. On the other hand, his originality as a human being was sunk in a mudflat. When Hugo returned to his home, he was unrecognisable even by the parents. His identity was already lost, because it had been corroded by the automated gears of a bureaucratic apparatus covered by an ideology based on lies (4).

In "The Garden Party", Havel establishes a parallel between art and reality. The main character of the play, like many Czechs during the communist period, chose to accept the lies propagated by the regime to obtain social and material gains, even that this choice would cost them individuality, originality, and autonomy (4).

Hugo's goal is precisely to enter the totalitarian system and get a place in the sun. The corruption is present not only in the political regime, but also inside Hugo's soul (4). The temptation for power and influence corrupted him, an automated individual who sold himself to conquer a position in the "Politburo".

The havelian thought reinforce a classic political idea

of Lord Acton: the power tends to corrupt. The real "Hugos" of Czechoslovakia followed the same steps of the character. Marked by a fragile posture and an existential void, they fill their life with the benefits received by political power (4). Nevertheless, the foundation of a system of lies is like a castle of sand—and it does not last forever.

The main character of the play is empty of a transcendental perception about life. He is unable to overcome self-projection in the "world of forms" marked by a utilitarian ethos that maximize vices and corruption in an imperfect terrain. Hugo is a perfect portrait of the spiritual crisis that ravages contemporary individuals and produce a "geometrical man" (4 p113). This kind of human being lives without bridges to an authentic life because they are subdued by rationalists and nihilists structures. The real capacities of self-development are blocked — liberty, autonomy and originality are reduced to nullity (5).

In the totalitarian system, every experience that aims to connect humans with their souls is despised. Hugo is out of harmony with his own human essence. Truth, ethics, moral, freedom, and beauty are forgotten in a world devoid of metaphysical belief. When the transcendental roots are cut of human existence, the meaning of life is dominated by ideologies that separate body from the soul (5).

The central theme of "The Garden Party" is the men meccanization, responsible by spiritual and material corruption in socio-political environment. Pretending to enter in system, Hugo learned a new language and incorporated a different *modus operandi*, getting power in a life of lies (4). Therefore, the totalitarian regime crashed his originality as an individual.

Havel realised that there are several young men like "Hugo" in the country — automated by totalitarian terror. Apparently, living in truth is a chimerical dream, but Havel remember that the flame of liberty and autonomy bright inside of the individual's soul, who need to fight to restore these values. By the play, Havel expressed his position against autocratic forces current in Czechoslovakia (4). It is an alert about the political context and the autocracy dangers in his homeland. This previous advice shows us his preoccupations with the directions of Czech society while a USSR's satellite. Moreover, he is concerned about the destruction of human's soul.

## 2.2 The Power of the Powerless

Following a philosophical and literary perspective, the essay "The Power of the Powerless" — the main political work of Havel — is a critic about totalitarianism. He condemns all dimensions of this regime and shows the dangers to politics, society, and mankind. Havel expresses his ideas about liberty, truth, and civility, which need to be improved in society, because individuals still lacking "civic responsibility" even in democratic regimes. According to Havel, the citizens are responsible to

make the difference and rebuild the values of freedom, ethics, and dignity. The moral capital based on civic responsibility was the legacy left by Havel, a man who always valued the importance of living in truth. This argument is central in the essay, a restoration of human dignity by a life in truth (6).

Returning to the specific content of the paper, "The Power of the Powerless" is a critic of communist regime of Czechoslovakia. The essay is full of metaphors and lyrism, that permit a poetic political analysis. In Havel's exegesis, totalitarian systems create a "world of appearances" based on three pillars: ideology, lies, and automatism (6).

First, ideology transforms the political system and human life in public and private dimensions into a "secular religion" by the impositions of behaviour norms (6). The Marxist ideology used by Czechoslovak communists in government changed all life aspects of individual and social life, remodulating socio-political structures according to the Kremlin aspirations. Ideology, used as a capable instrument of communication to sustain totalitarian foundations, it is a phenomenon that transcends the aspects of material power. Ideology is one of the totalitarian system bases, but it is built on a very unstable foundation. It is building on lies. It lives until the awakening of truth by a sense of civic responsibility present into individuals' soul (6).

Second, lies also sustain the "world of appearances": there's no distinction between arbitrariness and law; fraudulent elections are seen as the most effective form of democracy; the banishment of free speech is a way to move towards "scientific opinions". Moreover, the totalitarians change the name of government programs to give them a "human face", inserting words like "social" and "public". The totalitarian regime falsifies everything and is captive of their own lies, which are indispensable for the continuity of the system (6).

Finally, automatism legitimizes the regime through by distortions, unfair laws, and violation of rights. These practices are conceived natural, although the cruelty is explicit. Perversity becomes the rule and acquires an automatic form. All kinds of individual originality and autonomy are crashed by totalitarianism (6).

Furthermore, Václav Havel use the greengrocer's example to illustrate the common citizens life in a totalitarian regime. By this notorious example, he demonstrates the interactions of ideology, lies and automatism, the three foundations of totalitarianism. The author reports that a greengrocer printed the Marxist slogan in his sale: "workers of the world, unite!". In Havel's understanding, the greengrocer did not the intention to demonstrate enthusiasm for the regime, it only sought to avoid persecution and violence aims his survival (6). In the autocratic context, the communist propaganda by a Marx's citation reinforces the ties between individuals and government. At the same time as this ensured security for the greengrocer, it also reinforced

subordination in a hierarchical relation (7).

However, totalitarianism has an Achilles heel. The weakness of totalitarian regime is the lie. A system based on lies only works if individuals are willing to live according to the ideals of propagated by the totalitarian state. When the citizens unfollow governmental impositions and unfair rules, protesting against the dictatorial apparatus, the totalitarian regime tends to fade. That is the lesson of Havel's essay. This is the contribution of his political thought (8).

In the essay's conclusion, Havel emphasizes that the individual who yearns for freedom, dignity, and truth is never complete repressed by totalitarian structures (6). This kind of human being carry the virtue of civic responsibility in the depths of the soul. Totalitarianism can only be overthrown when individuals refuse to live under lies, it is the first step to break the automatism and confront the ideology. Therefore, it is possible to said that the power resides in the powerless (8).

### **3. The Political Act: From Autocracy to Democracy**

Born in Prague, in the year of 1936, Havel was a member of a rich, powerful, and intellectual family that was active in politics and culture. However, Havel's life was full of surprises (9). His acts were marked by turnaround, as a theatre's plot — he lives drama, tragedy, romance, and glory.

Havel maintains alive his efforts to rebuild the rule of law and bring back democracy in the totalitarian era. Without human rights guaranteed by law, Czechoslovak people suffered for decades behind the iron curtain raised by the USSR. A communist regime eliminates rival political parties and attacks the cultural and structural aspects of a society (10). In Czechoslovakia, for example, the power was centralized and notable men like Václav Havel, Milan Kundera and Jan Patočka became dissidents (9).

During the totalitarian era, Havel and the Czech people made efforts to dismantle the communist system. The Velvet Revolution was the apotheosis of dissident's struggle. Peacefully, they restore the rule of law and made a transition from communism to democracy, moment that Havel ascended to the Prague Castle as President (7). As a nation leader, he continues his transition work to guarantee a government based on the rule of law, which was crucial to reconstruct a democratic society (10).

In this section it will be discussed three acts of Havel's life: dissidence, revolution, and presidency. The values presented in the previous section are transported to the practical dimension of politics.

#### **3.1 The Prague Spring and Havel as Dissident**

In 1968, Alexander Dubcek, prime secretary of Czechoslovak communist party, supported by his

compatriots, tried to democratise communism (7 p380). The country was subdued by Stalinism, and Dubcek wanted to eliminate the authoritarian structures founded in ideology, lie and automatism.

When Dubcek started a process of economic and political reforms, distancing his country from the Kremlin, Leonid Brejnev ordered an invasion in Prague, in august of 1968 (7 p380). This event was called Prague Spring. Czechoslovak people are seeking to restore human values in a totalitarian environment, but the soviet tanks massacred this liberal attempt. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by USSR was a disaster for communism. The USSR's reputation around the world decreased, and the soul of communism was destroyed in the Prague Spring, according to Tony Judt (8).

Nevertheless, the political activities practised by dissidents was encouraged in Czechoslovakia. After the shattering of communism soul, people continued criticising soviet authorities in every opportunity. Václav Havel, for example, formed a group called Charter 77 to demonstrate public dissatisfaction about the regime. Although Charter 77 group suffered persecution, Havel maintained the union and attracted western leaders to support the struggle against totalitarianism, although it cost Havel's arrest (7 p448).

Havel emphasized the non-utopian disposition of Charter 77 as a dissident movement. The dissident disposition is attached on a real disposition of human being to pursuit a life in truth. Charter 77 was a way to overcome ideological chimeras and rediscover the power of the powerless, that is composed by principles like dignity, civic responsibility, transparency, and truth (10 p275). The signatories hoped a restoration of a moral dimension of political life — the way to guarantee freedom and citizenship.

Havel, as a dissident, contributed to the extinction of a utopic faith called communism. This ideology lost it soul in Prague Spring and, consequently, the *raison d'être*.

### 3.2 The Velvet Revolution and Havel as Leader

The civil society prepared the communism dismantle over the decades. Since Prague Spring, the totalitarian regime was not the same, because people searched for values attached on human dimension of being. By the end of the Cold War, the revolutions occurred in East Europe were founded in an individualist conception of freedom, rejecting all forms of rationalism and social engineering. Unlike traditional revolutions, the nations that were closed behind the Iron Curtain disapprove a vision of perfect society. The restoration of non-utopic principles is the main idea (10 p312).

In the communism twilight, the Czechoslovaks yearned to live in truth with a moral basis, capable to develop citizenship in a polyphonic environment. A plural society was constituted without ideologies

which propose an idyllic life in immanent dimension (10 p295).

The Velvet Revolution, event that market the transition from communism to liberal democracy in Czechoslovakia, was led by a civic perspective valued by Havel. This bloodless revolution guaranteed the rule of law, citizenship, and human values, catalysing Havel's political potential (10).



Fig 2 – Václav Havel leading the Velvet Revolution.

He held the position of Czechoslovakia's President during the period of 1989 – 1992. The only President of Czechoslovakia after the fall of communism, Havel signed the Velvet Divorce in 1993, when Slovaks pressured him to constitute an independent country. Therefore, since that year, two national states were born peacefully: Czech Republic and Slovakia. Havel was elected President of Czech Republic.

### 3.3 The Prague Castle and Havel as President

Havel assumed the presidency defending ideals like civic responsibility, human rights, market economy, and democratic society. These political principles are different in comparison with totalitarian basis once Havel preoccupied about the autocratic dismantle. He consolidated the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, burying a socialist soviet apparatus to allow the flourishing of a liberal democracy based on western political values and national traditions (8).

During the years of 1993 and 2003, Václav Havel was the President of Czech Republic. He was responsible for the structural reforms to dismantle communism to build a democratic regime. Havel led the country towards a liberal democratic system and a free market society (8).

Czech Republic was placed in a new status. Havel's political act as President was important to change the country's institutions (8). He abolished the totalitarian nightmare and built bridges to a democratic and humanitarian future. Havel established the rule of law and a capitalist economy, totally different of the communist *modus operandi*. His civic perspective of political life was crucial to restore the principles of truth, justice, and pluralism in a land once desolate by communism (7).

Havel emphasized the citizens share responsibility to



confront evil wherever and whenever it was seen (11). He understood civil society as an essential agent for development. Under Havel's government, Czech Republic strengthened ties with western nations. In 1999, the country joined NATO, a military alliance of North Atlantic. Czech Republic also joined European Union and OECD, in 2004. Finally, was integrated in Schengen Area, in 2007. Since 2009, Czech Republic is considered a developed country by the World Bank, and the level of development is "very high", according to Human Development Index (HDI) (8).

Furthermore, western values like liberty and pluralism were restored in Czech society. As President, he emphasized ethical principles to make reforms, his political thought is based on freedom, civility, and truth. Havel was convinced that politics should not be an instrument of power, but rather an expression of civility and morality, based on individual responsibility with the whole society (11). This thought gave him political authority and international support, placing Czech Republic in a prominent position in international society. Therefore, we can see that the winter was totalitarian, but spring belongs to everyone who fight to live in truth.

#### 4. Conclusion

The results of this paper allow us to comprehend that Havel's political practice is attached on his principled basis in terms of thought. As mentioned, his political thought is based on a moral and ethical view about politics, capable to reconquer human existence through emancipation by citizenship. This path is traced by individuals who carry the duty of civic responsibility. Havel emphasises values like liberty, dignity, and truth to promote a reconciliation of immanent and transcendent; politics and ethics; society and aesthetics; body and soul; human and being.

More than a critic of totalitarianism, Havel is also a man who cares about the human dimension of being. Democracy, in Havel's theory, has several gaps and cannot sustain civil society *per se*. A democratic regime must be combined with a collective disposition of the individuals to live in truth, restoring principles that transforms citizens into human beings.

"Beauty, truth, and goodness", said Socrates in Ancient Greece. Václav Havel embodied all these virtues during his life. He wrote and spoke beautifully. He also fought for everyone and lived his kindness. By telling the truth, although it costed years in prison, he guided Czechoslovakia and East Europe toward an anti-totalitarian society. He inspired the world by having truth as a light of his thought and life. The British poet John Keats, the last of the romantics, once said: "beauty is truth, truth beauty". And Havel teaches us that truth, to be beautiful, must also be courageous (12).

Havel turned poetry into politics and vice versa. His

thought is an innovative perspective for contemporary challenges faced in politics. He lived a unique life's experience and provided solid foundations that mix theory and empirical work seeking to build a civil society based on truth. It is possible to say that Havel opened the Iron Curtain and started a democratic play.

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