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Václav Havel on Human Conscience

Intro

Václav Havel is one of the main European dissidents and political leaders that helped bring the change from the old style communist regimes to capitalist democracies. Other well-known names include leaders such as Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Soviet Union, or the dissidents such as Lech Wałęsa of Solidarity, a Polish trade union. Václav Havel comes from a background of being a playwright oppose to being a political or union leader. Havel has had a significant impact on Czechoslovakia as a dissident and later as its first democratically president in over four decades. Going into the presidency Havel had about thirty years' experience as a playwright and a dissident under a communist regime. Havel's experience of living and playwriting under the Czechoslovakia's communist regime and eventually becoming their democratically elected president greatly influenced his ideology of stressing the importance of human conscience.

The crucial parts of this paper is to prove that Václav Havel developed a central political philosophy over his life and thus the term human conscience needs to be defined. The best place to start to define the political philosophy of human conscience is to look at Havel wrote about and said during his presidency and later life. The reason behind looking later is Havel's life is that it is likely Havel's political views have been solidified. The clearest and broadest definition of human conscience comes from President Havel's speech to a joint session of the United States Congress on February twenty-first, 1990. That the definition is, "the interpreter or mediator

between us and this higher authority is what is traditionally referred to as human conscience”.¹ What Havel is getting at is human conscience is the bridge between humanity and its inherent absolute rights. Without human conscience in government these rights are taken away from the people. The next question that arises is what these rights that President Havel thinks are inherent.

The first of these rights that President Havel discuss is the idea of freedom of expression, which is oppressed by communist regimes. Once again looking at the Joint Session of Congress speech he states, “Consciousness precedes Being, and not the other way around, as Marxists claim”.² Havel conveys the notion that free thought, emotion, and expression is more important than simply existing. With this claim one gets view that Havel thinks that Marxism does not value consciousness or conscience. Havel expands his thoughts of the corrupting nature of communism in his New Year’s address to Czechoslovakia on January first, 1990. After explaining the general attitude of frustration in post-communist Czechoslovakia Havel says, “Surprisingly, freedom has given vent to a number of bad feeling and shown the depth of the moral decline in our souls”.³ This passages highlights the Havel’s view that under a communist regime people were unable to express themselves including their frustrations. With this newly found freedom, people realized that there was a moral decline under communist rule. The morals he is likely referring to comes from his Congress speech which is, the “salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human humbleness and in human responsibility”.⁴ Havel describes the idea of freedom of expression,

¹ Havel, Vaclav. "A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress." A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress. United States House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 21 Feb. 1990. *Vaclav Havel*. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

² Ibid

³ Havel, Vaclav. "New Year’s Address to the Nation" Prague, January 1, 1991. *Vaclav Havel*. Web. 29 Sept. 2016

⁴ Havel, Vaclav. "A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress." A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress. United States House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 21 Feb. 1990. *Vaclav Havel*. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

acceptance, admitting one's mistakes, and progression of the human race by having nations work together.

Overall, the political philosophy of human conscience falls into two main camps freedom of expression, which includes free thought, identity, and natural rights. The other factor is the idea of responsibility which evolves from non-political means to political means, and eventually global responsibility. Havel's human conscience is rooted in a tradition of Czech humanism and Havel's life experiences

Background

Before discussing the development of Havel's political philosophy a background on the nation of Czech humanism, Czechoslovakia's political history and his life will be provided to help give context to Havel's political philosophy. These three crucial background concepts will be broken down two sections titled Czechoslovakia, covering both humanism and political history, and Havel's life.

Czechoslovakia

To start the discussion on Czechoslovakia the ideas of Czech humanism and nationalism will be address seeing that Havel is Czech. The major Czech culture period that relates to both nationalism and humanism comes from 19th and early 20th centuries. Historians Pavel Cibulka, Jan Hájek, and Martin Kučer describe this period Czech culture being recognized internationally and that, "The tumultuous epoch of cultural development proved Czech creativity not only in literature, music, fine arts and theatre, but also in the general level of education, entrepreneurship

and openness to the surrounding world”.⁵ What is important about this time period is the flourishing Czech culture. In terms of nationalism the rise of literature and increase in education is useful in creating a national identity around the Czech language. As for humanism the ideas of fine arts, theater, and most importantly the idea of openness to the world. One of the leading of intellectuals at this cultural expansion was the philosopher T.G Masaryk.⁶ T.G Masaryk philosophy does have a lasting impact on Czech humanism. Furthermore Masaryk has a tremendous impact on what will become Czechoslovakia and Havel’s thinking.

T.G Masaryk was a philosopher that did become the first president of Czechoslovakia and his ideals shaped the Czech humanism that Havel followed. Masaryk was elected the president of the first president of the Czechoslovakian republic on November 14, 1918, which he served as until 1935.⁷ With a long tenure as president this means that Masaryk shaped much of the identity of the country and its governing ideologies. One of these ideologies relates a back to the idea of a Czech variant humanism. The connection between Masaryk, Havel, and humanism comes from the biographer Zantovsky. Zantovksy does describe the humanism as a social humanism that is based in Havel’s family credo and the legacy of Masaryk, which “At its core was the idea of ‘standard universal optimum of needs’ of every individual, achieved through social regulation”.⁸ In other words, the brand of humanism that Havel follows is based around the idea of having a government that helps people achieve their universal needs. As to be discussed later Havel does incorporate the ideas of openness to the world.

⁵ Cibulka, Pavel, Jan Hájek, and Martin Kučer. "The Definition of Czech National Society during the Period of Liberalism and Nationalism." In *A History of the Czech Lands*, edited by Jaroslav Pánek and Oldřich Tůma, 373. Prague: Charles University, 2009.

⁶ Ibid 369

⁷ Harna, Josef. "First Czechoslovak Republic" *A History of the Czech Lands*, edited by Jaroslav Pánek and Oldřich Tůma, 396,421. Prague: Charles University, 2009.

⁸ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York, New York: Grove, 2014 34-35. Print.

Bring up Masaryk importance to Czechoslovakia and Czech humanism is good place to start to talk about the downfall of democracy and rise of communism in Czechoslovakia. Democracy came to an end in Czechoslovakia after its defeat to Germany and the establishment of the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which effectively got rid of local rule and the parliament.⁹ In all practicality Hitler's government took over and occupied the country. With the defeat of the Germans the question of democracy in Czechoslovakia hanged in the balance. Historian Jiří Kocian describes the period after the war to 1948 was the era were the democratic republic was one that was regulated and had the goal of the communist party to take complete control.¹⁰ This view paints the idea that democracy in post-war Czechoslovakia did not even stand a chance to return to its pre-war government. Instead communists totalitarian regime filled took control of the country. By February 1948 there was a government crisis that took place between 20th to the 25th of the month, which ended with coup by the communists that established the totalitarian regime.¹¹ Havel was eleven at the time of the coup and will spend the next four decades of his life living in the communist regime. However, the communist regime in its forty years did have some challenges to the regime.

In the forty years of communist rule Czechoslovakia there are three important political challenges or development. The first of these challenges is the Prague Spring, which took place in the spring of 1968. Broadly speaking the Prague Spring was a reformist movement in the Communist Party that resulted in opening the country to tourists and more freedoms for

⁹ Gebhart, Jan "Czechoslovakia in the years after the Munich Agreement and in the Second World War" *A History of the Czech Lands*, edited by Jaroslav Pánek and Oldřich Tůma, 442-443. Prague: Charles University, 2009.

¹⁰ Kocian, Jiří "Czechoslovakia Between Two Totalitarian Systems" *A History of the Czech Lands*, edited by Jaroslav Pánek and Oldřich Tůma, 463. Prague: Charles University, 2009.

¹¹ Pernes, Jiří "The Establishment and First Crisis of the Communist Regime" *A History of the Czech Lands*, edited by Jaroslav Pánek and Oldřich Tůma, 500-501. Prague: Charles University, 2009.

journalist.¹² This was a significant change to Czechoslovakia society as journalists could openly criticized the government and state their own opinion. However the Prague Spring came to end with a Soviet occupation of the country. Following the crackdown of the Prague Spring was the period of normalization in the country. Bernard Wheaton and Zdeněk Kavan describe normalization as a set of polices aim to have strict control over the country's ideology and punished nonconformist behavior.¹³ This meant that censorship was back and the communist government actively promoted conformity by going after dissidents. The last significant event to communist rule in Czechoslovakia is its end. In November of 1989 the Velvet Revolution happened, which resulted in the overthrow of the communist regime and the restoration of democracy in Czechoslovakia.¹⁴ This is the point in Czechoslovakia where Havel becomes president of the country. The next section will cover the life that Havel lived to help provide a better understanding of political philosophy.

Havel's life

In terms of Václav Havel, he is known mostly as playwright, dissident, and President of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. His life does start with his family origins will be looked into in order to describe the childhood that he had. Havel's grandfather, Václav Havel, built a construction and property empire in Prague, which Václav Havel's father, Václav Maria, continue to build throughout the Great Depression.¹⁵ The family that Václav Havel was born on October 5th 1936 it was into was from a line of landowners from his father's side. Furthermore this meant that Václav Havel lived in a family that had wealth giving him comfortable early

¹² Heimann, Mary. *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 211.

¹³ Wheaton, Bernard, and Zdenek Kavan. *The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988-1991*. Boulder: Westview, 1992. 6-7. Print.

¹⁴ Sux, Jiří "Czechoslovakia' Return to Democracy" *A History of the Czech Lands*, edited by Jaroslav Pánek and Oldřich Tůma, 589. Prague: Charles University, 2009.

¹⁵ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York, New York: Grove, 2014 15-16. Print.

childhood. Václav Havel's mother ran the family life and orchestrated her children's education with the help of nannies, and her father, Hugo Vavrečk, was diplomat, engineer, and a minister in the government among other occupations.¹⁶ Looking at Havel's mother and her side of the family reinforces the idea of the Havel came from a wealth family. In addition to the family's wealth is a degree of influence in Czechoslovakian society given that his grandfather did serve in the government.

The life style that Havel was born into though did see drastic changes early within his life, most notably the Second World War and the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948. In terms of the Second World War Havel still had a good childhood compared to everything else happening in Europe. Havel's father decided to withdraw into the country side in 1942 and Havel, "continued to have an idyllic childhood".¹⁷ What this point illustrates is that Havel's early childhood was not disturbed greatly by the war. Instead Havel lived comfortable as a young child throughout the war. The event that had a great impact on Havel's life was the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948. The result for Havel was being viewed as part of the bourgeois and barred from formal education all together and require to work as a laborer by 1950.¹⁸ The reason of being viewed as bourgeois relates back to his family wealth and status before 1948. However being barred from a formal education to not completely stop Havel from learning. Havel worked as a lab assistant in the Prague School of Chemical Technology and attended night classes after work.¹⁹ This meant at the young age of 14 Havel was working a day job in addition of going to school at night to get around communist restrictions. Havel next chapters of life continue with him living in a communist regime.

¹⁶ Ibid 17

¹⁷ Ibid 19Comm

¹⁸ Ibid 33

¹⁹ Ibid 33

The next areas of Havel's life will be discussed briefly as they lined up with the periods of his writings, which is discussed in further detail. In 1957, Havel was rejected from every university and film school that he applied to except for transportation economics at the Prague School of Economics because of his bourgeois status.²⁰ Once again Havel was barred from pursuing his ambitions because of the restrictions of the communist regime. Havel eventually dropped out of the University and joined the military, there was a two year requirement, where he started an amateur theater troupe.²¹ Havel's years in the military mark him taking the advantage of a situation that he did not want to be in. Through his service he managed to expand on his theatrical skills, which was one of his goals evident in the fact he wanted to go to film school. By the time Havel finished his time in the military there were new opportunities for him.

After military service Havel embarked on the path to becoming a renowned playwright in a time where the communist regime was fine with the promotion of the arts. In 1959, Havel could not get a job in the film industry, so he managed to get a job as a stagehand at a local theater in Prague.²² This is Havel's introduction to professional theater which has become a key aspect of Havel's identity. He then spends the 1960s as a playwright for the theaters in Prague. The biographer Zantovsky points out Havel's career in the 1960s benefited from an, "incredible renaissance of Czech modern culture".²³ In other words Havel managed to create a career in theater in a time that was relatively easier to do so. Also in this time Havel wrote more than plays, he wrote a number of letters, essays and articles that clearly show Havel got to this point despite the barriers that the communist government put in his way as a teenager. However eventually Havel will find himself once again barred from opportunities.

²⁰ Ibid 44

²¹ Ibid 44-46

²² Ibid 59

²³ Ibid 78

Havel's troubles begin on the aftermath of the Prague Spring but he still manages to continue his work. As already mentioned the Prague Spring brought certain reforms to the country and that normalization came afterwards. What this meant to Havel was that he was in an internal exile, which meant he could not produce plays inside of Czechoslovakia.²⁴ Even being unable to produce play Havel still wrote and continued to work on creating a better Czechoslovakia. During the 1970s Havel started to engage in dissident activism, which is known for. Mostly notably being a spokesman of the dissident group Charter 77.²⁵ Being part of Charter 77 is important to understand Havel as in addition of being playwright he was an active dissident. Naturally being a dissident in an oppressive means that one is prone to be arrested for their anti-government activities.

The period before the Velvet Revolution Havel spent as a prisoner and a dissident. Havel was arrested back in 1979 and was sentenced to serve four and a half years in prison, which started in January of 1980.²⁶ This is an important event within Havel's life as being in prison, though not uncommon to dissidents, is a milestone in his life. Part of the reason is that the communist regime fears the dissident activities that Havel conducted. In addition, being in prison helps shape a mysticism around Havel and his eventual rise to power. Through his year in prison Havel does write a collection of letters that were eventually published as *Letters to Olga*. Havel does get out early in March of 1983.²⁷ Throughout the 1980s Havel remained in a similar position that he was in the 1970s. He continued his dissident activities and writings up until the Velvet Revolution. As previously mentioned the Velvet Revolution marks the end of the

²⁴ Ibid 123

²⁵ Heimann, Mary. *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 284.

²⁶ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York, New York: Grove, 2014. 17, 217-218. Print.

²⁷ Ibid 243

communist regime and the election of Havel as president.²⁸ This marks the end of the description of Havel's life before becoming the president of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. His life was one that was born in high status on the eve the Second World War and one that was barred from a formal education during the communist rule. However Havel still manage to become a well-known playwright and dissident, which eventually landed him to become a president.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is one of the center themes of Havel's idea of human conscience that has developed from Havel's love and work with the arts. Havel life has already been discussed but there are few more details relevant to the development of the concept of freedom of expression Havel's introduction to the arts started from an early age as his uncle Miloš owned filmed studios and Havel's mother encourage his artistic talent when she educated him during World War II.²⁹ What that means, is Havel's family found it important to encourage expression of the arts even during a time of hardship. The early passion for the arts eventually results into Havel getting involved in theater by the 1960s. The biographer Zantovsky points out Havel's career in the 1960s benefited from an, "incredible renaissance of Czech modern culture".³⁰ Starting his career in a time where there has more freedom of expression than before impacted Havel in a positive way. Havel simply got a taste of what freedom of expression is like.

During the 1960s Havel gave and wrote a few speeches and publications that show his joy in the increased freedoms and he advocates for more. The first of these publications is a speech that Havel gave in 1965 to the Union of Writers of Czechoslovakia, the governing body

²⁸ Heimann, Mary. *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 306.

²⁹ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York, New York: Grove, 2014. 17, 22. Print.

³⁰ Ibid 78

of written published work. *On Evasive Thinking* is speech that primarily deals the ills of living in a communist society, which will be covered later, and what can be done to improve society, mainly promoting freedom of thought. Within the speech Havel calls out the Union of Writers with the recommendation that, “it should never hand out directives on how to write, or impose any artistic program on literature”.³¹ Basically, the main point here is the Union of Writers should take more of *lassie faire* approach when it comes writing. The role of the Union should not be telling what the writers to write but, “help literature and authors to be true to themselves”.³² The intent that Havel is getting at is the Union can be a good concept if it helped writers improve their work. Interesting enough at this point of time Havel is not calling for the abolition of Union Writers. Additionally, *On Evasive thinking* was published to the public in 1968 during the Prague Spring.

As a reminder the Prague Spring was a reform movement in Czechoslovakia largely conducted by the communist party, which benefited to Havel. Zantovsky recounts that the Prague Spring is often viewed as extreme change in society, which in reality most of reforms were moderate expect for abolition of censorship.³³ This breaks the notion that Prague Spring was a turn in Czechoslovakia toward a non-communist society. However the significant reform is freedom of speech were there can be open discussion and critique in society. Oddly enough during the Prague Spring Havel was not too active with the new found freedom of speech. Zantovksy highlights that Havel did “take the back seat to more outspoken reformist intellectuals”, while still attending the early town hall meetings and meeting with some of the

³¹ Havel, Václav. "On Evasive Thinking." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 19. Print.

³² Ibid 19

³³ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York: Grove, 2014. 100. Print.

reformists such as Dubček.³⁴ This does mean that Havel did pay attention to the events unfolding in Czechoslovakia. While choosing not to fully participate in the civic debate with the reformists. However, Havel does enter the debate at one point with an article called *On the Theme of an Opposition*.

Under the context of freedom of expression, *On the Theme of an Opposition* touches on that the only way to keep the rights that the Prague Spring introduced is through democratic reforms. This article was published on April 4th 1968 under the new censorship free laws. Havel in the writing remains skeptical of the communist regime's reforms in the country. His main concern is the reforms only come from the communist party as he explains:

We are frequently told that because we now have freedom of speech (which is supposedly the basis of democracy), public opinion, assisted by the media, will carry out the natural restraining function of an opposition. This notion is based on the faith the government will draw the appropriate conclusion from public criticism. The trouble is, democracy is not a matter of faith, but of guarantees.³⁵

What this section is getting at is the freedom of speech during the Prague Spring is worthless. The reason is that the freedom does not exist as guarantee to society but by good faith from the communist party. Without democracy the politicians can either respond to or ignore public opinion as their power is not checked by the people, by means of an election. Even worse, the communist party can simply start censorship again if their power is threatened. From this section it is evident the Havel thinks that only way to have freedom of expression is through democracy in which people have a real choice.

³⁴ Ibid 102.

³⁵ Havel, Václav. "On the Theme of an Opposition." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 26. Print.

Havel does explain in more detail why a true democracy is necessary for freedom of expression, in *On the Theme of Opposition*. Havel's logic of the necessity of true democracy for freedom of expression boils down to the fact that the Prague Spring communist party cannot maintain itself. The primary reason the communist party cannot sustain itself according to Havel is, "without democracy throughout society, inner party democracy cannot be maintained for long. It is not the latter that guarantees the former".³⁶ This ties back to the theme that Czechoslovakia society is putting its faith in the communist party for its freedoms. The only way according to Havel to maintain democracy is have it be inclusive, include the whole of society, not exclusive, reserved for the inner communist party. As an exclusive one will instill certain ideas and values its members. Thus Havel purposes the creation around the principals that truly resonates to the freedom of expression aspect human conscience. Havel describes that the second party in relation to the people, "not ... forcing upon them the will and ideas of others, but also of accepting their will and their ideas".³⁷ In short, this is freedom of expression as there is a free flow thought in the ideal party Havel creates. In his view even the Prague Spring Czechoslovakia is far from the ideal because of one party rule and in the end of day the communist party wants to maintain its power.

In 1968 Havel managed to travel to the United States and be exposed to western culture and to cultivate new ideas about the importance of expression. Havel spent six weeks in the United States while the Prague Spring was in full swing. The most significant aspect of Havel's trip was meeting with former friends and other Czech intellectuals, such as Jan Werich and Ferdinand Peroutka. Zantovsky argues the men that Havel meet in the United States, "exemplified the open-minded, critical and question tradition of liberal thought", and their ideas

³⁶ Ibid 27

³⁷ Ibid 32

nourished Havel's intellect.³⁸ This stresses that trip on the United States did have an impact on Havel but unfortunately Havel does not write much about his own experiences in the United States, he only did a few interviews. However it would be hard to argue that the trip to the United States did not impact him in some way. By the time Havel returned the Prague Spring was on its final march and on August 21st of 1968 Soviet forces entered the country to end the reforms of the Prague Spring. By 1969 Havel found himself forced into an internal exile for joining a protest based on the petition called the ten points.³⁹ In his exile Havel became unable to publish writings, produce any plays, or even leave the country.

Even being exiled in Czechoslovakia, Havel still wrote plays under the context of Czechoslovakian normalization. To reiterate, normalization was the communist party's response to Prague Spring, which sought strict control of the country's media and promoted conformity to communist ideology.⁴⁰ These polices did have an impact on the plays that Havel did manage to write during this time. Zantovsky summarizes that that by 1971 Havel started to learn to write changelessness.⁴¹ The theme of changelessness is a reflection on the mindset that Czechoslovakia was stagnating as a society in the normalization period. Interesting enough the first play, *The Conspirators*, was not well reviewed. Zantovsky links the lackluster play to Havel's inability to "develop his ideas in contact with his audience".⁴² Havel at this time found it impossible to freely express himself even when writing as he had no audience interaction. At certain point in the 1970s Havel falls into a slump, and discusses the hardship of being blacklisted.

³⁸ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York: Grove, 2014. 110. Print.

³⁹ Ibid 123-124, 130

⁴⁰ Wheaton, Bernard, and Zdenek Kavan. *The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988-1991*. Boulder: Westview, 1992. 6-7 Print.

⁴¹ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York: Grove, 2014. 134. Print.

⁴² Ibid 136

The inability to express himself in Czechoslovakian public freely had serious impact on Havel, which Havel used to do some self-reflection. His self-reflection became the short autobiography *Second Wind* first published in the west in 1977. One of the interesting sections of the autobiography is how Havel viewed the 1960s. To him it was time for theater simply, “remarkable and relatively favorable era in which my plays ... could actually reach the stage, something that would have been impossible both before and after that”.⁴³ Havel reflection indicates that despite his frustrations in the 1960s, it was still a time during which one could express in the theater. It is clear that Havel felt a personal loss as well with inability to be part of the theater or be an artist. Without surprise, Havel captures the feeling as, “It was not just the carnival-like elation of 1968 had come to an end; the whole world crumbled”.⁴⁴ One point that Havel is making is that Prague Spring was a time of joy and its ending had drastic effects. Czechoslovakia did not return to pre-Prague Spring, one in which theater was still active, but instead emerged a shattered society. Another take away from this is that Havel’s spirit is shattered and the idea of freedom of expression becomes more personal as he lost it.

Before *Second Wind*, in 1976, Havel wrote a short essay called *The Trial* that was composed of his thoughts about a trial of four musicians. Briefly the essay’s main theme is frustration with communist regime, legal system and the treatment of artists. Within the essay Havel goes on a tirade against the public prosecutor as “He was a mouthpiece for the world of spiritual manipulation, opportunism, emotional sterility, banality, a moral prudery”.⁴⁵ Havel thought the trial was a sham and was the communist regime cracking down on those expressing

⁴³ Havel, Václav. "Second Wind." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 6. Print.

⁴⁴ Ibid 8

⁴⁵ Havel, Václav. "The Trial." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 103. Print.

different opinions. The decisions made in the trial were not ones that were based off morals but ideological concerns from the government. Havel goes further by stating the trial became a debate over, "...whether one should silently accept the world as it is presented to on and slip obediently into one's prearranged place in it, or whether one has the strength to exercise free choice in the matter..."⁴⁶ The debate that is discussed is between accepting the communist regime's view and the ability for one to speak freely. Havel views that the judicial system is clearly a puppet of the regime to crack on the idea that freedom of expression is needed in society. His frustrations are shared among many and become dissidents.

Havel continues to fight for freedom of expression and democratization in Czechoslovakia by being a dissident that joined Charter 77. The charter itself was a network for fellow dissidents. According to Wheaton and Kavan, the message of Charter 77 was one based around having a community of free thought, a force to counteract normalization, and even interact with dissidents abroad.⁴⁷ The first main message, community of free thought, is more relevant to this part on freedom of expression, the other two messages will be discussed later. What this means for Havel is that he was part of group that advocated the free flow of ideas. Indicating that Havel values free thought and is willing to break the law by against normalization. However, Charter 77 was not widely publicized and members only joined through personally contacts, which resulted Charter 77 to be isolated.⁴⁸ This shows the limited impact of the Charter 77 as it does not have a larger influence on Czechoslovakia. The importance of Charter 77 is that it had an impact on Havel.

⁴⁶ Ibid 105

⁴⁷ Wheaton, Bernard, and Zdenek Kavan. *The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988-1991*. Boulder: Westview, 1992. 12. Print.

⁴⁸ Ibid 13

Havel's involvement in Charter 77 was paramount as he was one of the founding members, and the Charter's creation. Charter 77 was founded on December 11th 1976 and took the next month to create a document, and get 250 signatories. Havel became the one of the three spokesmen of the group and use his position to invite more members to Charter 77.⁴⁹ Being the spokesmen to dissident group comes with prestige and risk. The prestige aspect is manifested in that Havel's peers thought Havel was dedicated to the cause to the point that he should be one of the leaders of the movement. Havel's peers knew that Havel valued the idea of openness in society based off the peers' decision to make him a spokesman. The risk comes from increased visibility and accountability to the communist regime. Simply put Havel by being the spokesman is larger threat the Communist Party. At this point the idea of freedom of expression starts to expand to include a new idea of identity. Identity as political philosophy concept is heavily intertwined with the ideas of freedom of expression. That being said the intertwined ideas of identity and expression is significant enough development to warrant a distinction from freedom of expression alone.

Freedom of Expression plus Identity

The moment when identity starts to be mentioned comes from Havel's first time in jail, where he became more dedicated to his cause. His arrest came in January 1977 for Havel and fellow dissident, Pavel Landovský, as they had Charter 77 literature in their car, which was not surprising as the police have been tracking the group for some time.⁵⁰ The details of the arrest do not matter as what matters was Havel was arrested. Over the next few months Havel was detained as the preparation for the trial started. During the months of being prison Havel fell into an episode of depression. Zantovsky writes Havel during these months, "came to the conclusion

⁴⁹Zantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York: Grove, 2014. 174. Print.

⁵⁰Ibid 174-177

that his moral compass was inbuilt, independent of the opinion of others and independent of practical consequences; that it was a matter of his one inner identity, of being true to oneself, of living in truth”.⁵¹ The idea of identity starts to play a more important role with Havel’s idea of freedom of expression. Even in a time where he is trapped with himself he is still able to hold on to what he believes. By the end of May Havel is let go as the charges were dropped on him.

Havel continues to work with Charter 77 and by 1978 Havel’s connections in the group inspired him to write one of his most famous works, the essay *Power of the Powerless*. The essay was written after a time of meeting with Polish dissidents at the Czechoslovakian and Polish border. The result of these meetings was an increase of secret police surveillance on him, but he did fare better than other members of the Charter 77 likely because of his voluntary seclusion in the summer of 1978.⁵² All these events add to the context that Havel was writing in a time of high tension between dissidents and the governments. Also a time when the dissidents started to interact more internationally. Overall the essay itself comes off as a political manifesto and defining the terms of what dissent is.⁵³ The parts of the essay that will be looked at the moment are themes that relate to the oppressive ideology creating a lack of freedom of expression and public identity.

One of the main themes of the *Power of the Powerless* is the oppressive ideology of the communist regime. To explain his concept Havel uses an example of a grocer and why they put up a communist propaganda poster on the store window. The primary reason why a grocer puts up the poster is to promote communist ideology which, “demands conformity, uniformity, and

⁵¹ Ibid 191

⁵² Ibid 198-199

⁵³ Ibid 199

discipline”.⁵⁴ In Havel’s view these ideas contradict the core values of life which are, “plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization ... fulfilment of its own freedom”.⁵⁵ In other words the idea being independent and freedom are inherent and that communism goes against what is natural. In addition, Havel is calling the idea of having freedom to be complete lie. Similar to how he called the freedom of expression in the Prague Spring to be façade. With both ideologies being far apart is the reason why communist sends out posters and other propaganda in order to make its ideology same natural.

In order maintain control communist regimes engage in what Havel calls hypocrisy and lies to maintain order. Communist regimes try to run the everyday lives of the citizens by making false claims about the effectiveness of the government. Havel lists the following hypocrisies and governmental lies, which two of them are, “the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom ... banning independent thought becomes the most scientific world of views”.⁵⁶ Twisting meaning of words is what Havel is describing what the communist regime is doing. That the communist in power want to create a reality in which they dictate what is freedom and true. Clearly Havel views these to be lies and does not accept what the government is saying. He even goes on to say, “Individuals need not believe in all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did”. What is interesting is that Havel is describing a system in which one can potentially have a private opinion as long they follow communist ideology publically. What this means in terms of freedom of expression and individuality is that former does not exist and the latter does. Expression can only exist if it follows the ideology, but the individual only needs to conform in a public space.

⁵⁴ Havel, Václav. "Power of the Powerless." *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-eastern Europe*. Ed. John Keane. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985. 29. Print.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid 30

Havel acknowledges that public conformity is created by the people but there is a disconnection between the propaganda and the people. Conformity in this sense is that the grocer does not act alone and that every storeowner participates to putting up posters. Havel argues that the large amount of posters is people often ignore the slogans of the poster and they just become the back drop to society.⁵⁷ The fact that people do not even bother to read the posters shows a lack of faith in the system. However, the people still continue not to resist the societal norms. The result is that each individual action contributes to a larger scheme. Havel points out this larger scheme, “has a subliminal meaning as well: it reminds people where they are living and what is expected of them”.⁵⁸ The expectation is that those is society should just simply follow what the communist party deems appropriate. An individual in the end of the day is a part of larger machine and has to perform its job as expected, regardless if that individual believes the lies it is publicly supporting or not.

Havel within *Power of the Powerless* does entertain the thought of happens if the grocer decides to not put up the poster. If the grocer follows through in not putting the poster they suffer punishment from the communist regime. In this scenario the grocer decides not to put the poster and actually speak freely about his thoughts on society. Havel describes the process as the grocer, “rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. He discover once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom concrete significance. His revolt is attempt to *live within truth*”.⁵⁹ Living in truth is what it means to live with freedom of expression and having one’s own identity. Before the hypothetical revolt the grocer did not express himself or identity publicly. The grocer had to cease to be himself in order to exist, which is getting at the heart of

⁵⁷ Ibid 35

⁵⁸ Ibid 35

⁵⁹ Ibid 39

what Havel views to be terrible about the communism. By doing this the grocer in the scenario is in danger as his actions are viewed to be a threat to society. The threat comes from the fact the grocer is, “breaking the rules of the game, he has disrupted the game as such. He has exposed it as a mere game. He has shattered the world of appearance, the fundamental pillar of the system”.⁶⁰ The grocer is a threat as he broke the illusion that everyone has become compliant to. However, the government does what is necessary to maintain this system.

Havel quickly learns what it is like to be the grocer that refuses to put the sign up as his being part of Charter 77 final gets him arrested and thrown in jail. Havel eventual arrest in 1979 comes to no surprise based on his dissident association with Charter 77 and his earlier short arrest in 1977. His arrest came on 28 May 1979 after almost a year of the police tracking Havel’s whereabouts.⁶¹ Havel spent the next few months in prison as the preparation of the trial went under way. The government before the trial offer Havel a choice of either going to the United States for a year or go to trial. Interesting Zantovsky finds Havel refusal to go to the United States and serve five years in jail to be a hard decision. Zantovsky concludes the decision to serve jail time was not made to make Havel look like a hero but made the decision as conflicted man.⁶² Havel struggle between deciding a jail sentence or temporary exile shows a human aspect to him. In the end his decision to stay in Czechoslovakia and go to jail revolved around his identity. Havel viewed himself as a Czech and did not know what would happen to him if he left to go to the United States.⁶³

In terms of looking of development of the ideology of freedom of expression and identity Havel’s few writings in prison and after do not show much change in attitude, with the exception

⁶⁰ Ibid 39-40

⁶¹ Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York: Grove, 2014. 207-212. Print.

⁶² Ibid 216

⁶³ Ibid 217

of one piece that mentions conscience. The writing in question is the called *Politics and Conscience* originally written as a speech that he not able to give, so it was published instead in 1984. Havel goes on to describe key elements of the human condition which does by saying, “We must not be ashamed that we are capable of love, friendship, solidarity, sympathy, and tolerance, but just the opposite: we must set these fundamental dimensions of our humanity free from their ‘private exile’”.⁶⁴ The values that Havel lists is are ones that are what he views what it means to be human, what is natural. That these values should not be suppressed but be freely expressed instead. Havel links these values to the idea of human conscience by the end of the speech by asking the following question of that will people, “seek to make a real political force out of a phenomenon so ridiculed by the technicians of power — the phenomenon of human conscience”?⁶⁵ This is the first appearance of the term of human conscience and it ties back to the ideas of freedom of expression and identity, which are seen through the values previously mentioned in the speech. At this point Havel’s political ideology and philosophy have been solidified, as elements of this speech can be seen in his presidential speeches.

Responsibility

The best way to explain Havel’s definition of responsibility is to look again at his Joint Session of Congress speech. Towards the end of the speech president Havel says, “accept the burden of political responsibility”.⁶⁶ President Havel at best is vague on the idea of political responsibility. Likely he is talking about that politicians need to own up to the past sins of the state and mend them. The vague definition is fine as the theme of the government needs to take

⁶⁴ Havel, Václav. "Politics and Conscience." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 267. Print.

⁶⁵Ibid 271

⁶⁶ Havel, Vaclav. "A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress." A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress. United States House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 21 Feb. 1990. *Vaclav Havel*. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

responsibility is constant throughout Havel's work. Briefly, Havel's view on responsibility naturally shifts for him to take responsibility, as the old communist regime was unable to do so. By looking at his writings and letters there is a trend that Havel has hope that the communist party can take responsibility to the communist party is unable to take responsibility. Throughout his life, when writing or discussing about political responsibility there is usually frustration with the status quo.

The earliest discussion about responsibility comes from the already mentioned speech *On Evasive Thinking*. The start of the speech is criticism of journalist that fails to call out the government over a window falling out and killing someone. Havel summarizes the article by pointing out the journalist acknowledges the event but immediately changes the subject to how government allows the public is able to openly criticize.⁶⁷ The issue here is that journalist is not holding the government accountable for fallen window. Instead the journalist uses article to praise the government for allowing public to criticize, which is him expanding the context of what actually happened. Havel describes phenomenon as, "contextualization: the praiseworthy attempt to see things in their wider context becomes so formalized ... Thus what looks like an attempt to see something in a complex way in fact results in a complex form of blindness".⁶⁸ This phenomenon is the idea of evasive thinking, which is the act of covering up or minimizing the truth. Havel is getting out that no one is taking responsibility with the evasive language that is being used.

Havel relates his issue of evasive language with the individual writer to the idea that communist government and its institutions do the same. Havel first approach is not directly

⁶⁷ Havel, Václav. "On Evasive Thinking." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 10. Print.

⁶⁸ Ibid 13

related to the government or politicians taking responsibility, but instead writers should. *On Evasive Thinking* Havel clearly states, “What I called the clearing of the air will not be one for writers by politicians; that is not their job”.⁶⁹ Clearing the air in context is about getting rid of the contextualized style of thinking and have writers actually discuss what is really going on.

Interesting enough at the time Havel views that only group that needs to take responsibility Union of Writers. This is different than his rhetoric as President when giving his speech at the Joint Session of Congress, which he comes to the conclusion, “[He] ultimately decided after resisting for a long time to accept the burden of political responsibility”.⁷⁰ What this means is that Havel in the 1960s did have the idea of responsibility but did not view it as political obligation, yet. One likely explanation is when he gave his speech, *On Evasive Thinking*, he thought only writers needed to take responsibility. The Prague Spring and its aftermath changes Havel’s view on who needs to take responsibility.

In the Prague Spring, as discussed before, Havel wrote one article, *On the Opposition*, which discusses that the communist party cannot maintain its self-restraints. The main point of lack restraint is that there is a lack of external check to communist party’s sole rule of the country. The issues Havel then describes is:

The bitter experience of revolution is that unless the group that takes absolute power into its own hands moves in time to restore eternal restraints to that power sooner or later the internal, self-imposed limitations begin to degenerate as well.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid 24

⁷⁰ Havel, Vaclav. "A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress." A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress. United States House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 21 Feb. 1990. *Vaclav Havel*. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

⁷¹ Havel, Václav. "On the Theme of an Opposition." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 27. Print.

In this regard political responsibility is that the government needs to ensure that the limitations on themselves comes from an external forces, which in this context is the people and the press. If it does not, the government will likely revert back to its old ways. This is shift from the *On Evasive Thinking* speech as the Havel is only talking about the government and that it needs to guarantee to external restraints. This ties back to the idea of freedom speech is useless if it can be ignored or take away. In this context is the communist government is not being responsible as it does not ensure an opposition can exist.

Part of the aftermath of the Prague Spring was the resignation of Alexander Dubček, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, and Havel writes him a letter to encourage him not to give up his principals. The letter is simply titled *Letter to Alexander Dubček* and is dated on August 9, 1969. At the time Dubček was still a member in the parliament as a figurehead and was being pressured to support the Soviet military invasion that stopped the Prague Spring.⁷² Thus Havel writes him a letter to encourage him not to sell out his principals. Dubček had popularity with the Czechoslovakian people and Havel did not want Dubček to legitimize the military invasion by stating support for it. Havel supports Dubček's popularity by stating, "People see you as an honorable, honest, and courageous man; they regard you as a politician devoted to a just cause".⁷³ Here Havel is concerned that the communist party to use Dubček's popularity to crush the opposition and dissidents in the country. As Dubček was viewed in high regard and as one that stood for "Socialism with a human face".⁷⁴ Thus if the champion of the Prague Spring supports the intervention there could be dire consequences for Czechoslovakia. In other words, Havel is hoping that Dubček takes responsibility in the sense of not selling out.

⁷²Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life*. New York: Grove, 2014. 122. Print.

⁷³ Havel, Václav. "Letter to Dubček ." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 38. Print.

⁷⁴ Ibid

Havel in *Letter to Alexander Dubček*, goes in detail of what Havel thinks are Dubček's three options to deal with the pressure from the communist party, with two of them deal with Dubček not taking responsibility. The first option that is laid out is the idea Dubček capitulates and comments that Prague Spring was a mistake and Soviet intervention was needed. Havel concludes, "In this way, of course, you would greatly assist the present party leadership, but at the cost of dealing a terrible blow to the moral fiber of our nations that might take a whole generation to recover".⁷⁵ Havel acknowledges this path does have political benefit to those in power but brings up the importance of morality. At the same time, Havel realizes the impact if someone turns against what they believe in. The second path is the idea that Dubček remains silent and does not denounce the Prague Spring or stand up for it. Havel points out that in the end this option, "would only lead, ultimately, to the same moral crisis as the first alternative".⁷⁶ Once again Havel expressed the importance of morality in politics and Dubček is faced with two options that would be immoral. Instead Dubček needs to take a political burden in order to keep morality in Czechoslovakia, which leads to Havel to describe the third option.

The third option revolves around Havel advocating that Dubček takes the moral responsibility for the nation. In this option Dubček needs to stand up to the communist party by defending the Prague Spring and be outspoken against the Soviet military intervention. Havel is aware that this action will have, "will have no positive effect on the immediate situation on the contrary, it will probably be exploited to justify further repression".⁷⁷ In this regard Havel knows that actions even for morally right reasons still suffer consequences. Calculating the potential risk involved with opposing the communist party, shows that Havel has political insight. Havel's logic

⁷⁵ Ibid 41

⁷⁶ Ibid 42

⁷⁷ Ibid 43

for Dubček to be outspoken is that, “People would realize that it is always possible to preserve one’s ideals and one’s backbone; that one can stand up to lies; that there are values worth struggling for”.⁷⁸ Hope is what Havel is asking Dubček to provide by taking responsibility for his actions. In this case responsibility is no admitting to wrong but standing up for the right morals, which existed in some degree in the Prague Spring. Havel does make it clear that standing up for values is a matter of responsibility. Havel writes, “I realize it’s easy for me to give advice when I’m not in your shoes and don’t have your responsibility”.⁷⁹ The last bit of section highlights that Dubček is in unique position and has to use it for the betterment of the people. Secondly it shows that Havel knows that advice is easy and actions are harder.

The *Letter to Alexander Dubček*’s impact on Dubček himself is unknown but the impact on Havel helped inspired the founding of Charter 77. To start Havel mentions years later that he knew that Dubček got the letter but was unsure what Dubček thought of it. Havel concludes, “[Dubček] disappeared rather quietly ... he didn’t betray his own cause by renouncing it, but he didn’t bring his political career to a very vivid end either”.⁸⁰ Havel having influence on Dubček or not does not matter. What matters is Havel viewing Dubček both in a positive and negative light. The positive view comes from Dubček staying to his principles and not renouncing the Prague Spring. The negative view or critic, is that Dubček just left political life all together and did not continue the fight for the democratization and opening Czechoslovakian society. The idea to continue to fight for a better Czechoslovakia impacted Havel. Havel looking back at his own letter seventeen years realized that he wrote:

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid 44

⁸⁰ Havel, Václav, and Karel Hviždala. *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hviždala*. Trans. Paul Wilson. New York: Knopf, 1990. 114. Print.

I had written that even a purely moral act that has no hope of any immediate and visible political effect can gradually and indirectly, over time, gain in political significance. In this I found, to my own surprise, the very same idea that, having been discovered by many people at the same time, stood behind the birth of Charter 77.⁸¹

This section is a reflection about Havel realizing his letter to Dubček had an impact on himself. The idea of standing up for what you believe in and going against the communist party. In addition Havel mentions finding other like him and the eventual creation of Charter 77. Overall *Letter to Alexander Dubček* is largely significant for Havel sub-consciously realizing that he needed to stand up, which lead him to become a dissident.

Charter 77 for Havel was a step into trying to shape Czechoslovakian society, which he does describe in *Power of the Powerless*. The main goal according to Havel of a dissident group is to, “serve truth, that is, to serve the real aims of life”.⁸² Idea of the real with explain in the previous section dealing with freedom of expression and identity. In terms of responsibility it means that dissident groups need to promote the idea of truth. Havel notes that dissident groups need be:

potentially accessible to everyone; it must foreshadow a general solution and, thus, it is not just the expression of an introverted, self-contained responsibility that individuals have to and for themselves alone, but responsibility to and for the world.⁸³

Here Havel finally expands his idea of political reasonability into global responsibility. The idea of self-contained responsibility deals more with one staying true to themselves. However global

⁸¹ Ibid 114-115

⁸² Havel, Václav. "Power of the Powerless." *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-eastern Europe*. Ed. John Keane. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985. 787. Print.

⁸³ Ibid 80

responsibility seems to be a newer idea. Before Havel did talk about political responsibility when he urged Dubček to stand for what he believes in and thus help Czechoslovakia. There is difference between talking about a nation and the global. Overall responsibility evolves from staying true to oneself to make the world a better place.

Havel does further stress the importance that value of responsibility is one that human community needs to share. The best is explanation of the expanding definition is, “higher responsibility, a new-found inner relationship to other people and to the human community”.⁸⁴ At this point Havel is calling for people and nations to work together in order to improve the world. A likely large influence on Havel pivot towards the international community is his few meetings with Polish dissidents before writing *Power of the Powerless*.

The last piece of written work that will be looked at is *Politics and Conscience*, which solidifies the idea that responsibility is linked to the world community. The term of responsibility in this speech tends to follow the same idea address in *Letters to Dubček* which is responsibility is to stand up for the values of freedom of expression and identity. Havel expands the idea that everyone must be responsible by declaring, “dignified human ‘I’, responsible for ourselves because we are bound to something higher, and capable of sacrificing something, in extreme cases everything”.⁸⁵ The ‘I’ in this cases is not Havel, but every individual, which Havel claims that responsibility to oneself is automatically link to something higher. The phrase “bound to something higher” does not imply humans are bound to God, but instead to each other. The evidence comes from before the quote Havel said that people needed to put, “responsibility

⁸⁴ Ibid 92

⁸⁵ Havel, Václav. "Politics and Conscience." *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*. Trans. Paul R. Wilson. New York: Vintage, 1992. 263. Print.

above desires, in making human community meaningful”.⁸⁶ The idea of Havel is stressing is that all humanity has to be able to work together. In order to cooperate with one another there needs to be the promotion of the ideas of free thought and people having their own identity. Overall responsibility is about staying true to oneself, standing up for you what you believe, government accountability and participate in the human community.

Conclusion

Playwright, dissident, and president are the occupations that has defined Havel’s life. A life that was born in luxury on the eve of World War II and the chaos that followed it. Communism took over the nation of Czechoslovakia when Havel was still a child, which did impact his access to education. Even with barriers placed on him, Havel still manage to become a renowned playwright by the 1960s, a dissident in the 70s and president by 1990. His experiences under communist rule and roots in Czech humanism helped shape his political philosophy of human conscience. The idea freedom of expression, which called for the ability to one to express their views on the public form without fear of government silencing the view. Eventually, identity splinters out of freedom of expression as Havel acknowledges that individuals have an inner moral compass and private opinions that do not match what they express publicly. Lastly, Havel talks a great deal of responsibility that starts with writers should write in non-evasive language. Responsibility shifts towards the ideas of government accountability, standing up for what your beliefs, and being a member of the human community.

⁸⁶ Ibid 263

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