

# Two Concepts of a Lie: Václav Havel on Living in a Communist Regime

Ondřej Krása

University of Pardubice, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

Ondrej.Krasa@upce.cz

---

## Abstract:

According to Václav Havel's famous essay *The Power of powerless* life within a lie is at the core of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Life within a lie is characteristic for the great majority of people and is contrasted with life within the truth which is characteristic of dissent movement. In this paper, I will try to shed some light on the concept of "living within a lie." I will show that Havel develops not one but two concepts of a lie: on the one hand, lie is deliberate pretence; on the other hand, lie is seduction by consumerist values. The first meaning of a lie is derived from Havel's analysis of the specifics of the Soviet sphere of influence, namely central role of ideology with omnipresent demands on public support of the regime. The second meaning of a lie is heavily influenced by a critical assessment of modern society from the leading figure of the Czech underground movement Ivan Jirous and leading Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. This double meaning of a lie enables Havel to capture both specific problems of living under the communist regime and general problems of living in modern society anywhere in the world. In the final chapters of this paper, I will show that Havel is not clear about how these two meanings of a lie are connected and that there are problems resulting from these unclaritys both for Havel's analysis of the communism and his proposed solution of the crisis.

**Keywords:** Václav Havel, truth, lie, dissent, Jan Patočka, underground

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.46854/fc.2021.4s50>

---

In "The Power of the Powerless", one of the most influential texts from the Soviet sphere of influence, Václav Havel analyses the nature of the communist regime and the nature of the opposition movement. According to Havel, life within a lie is at the core of the regime. Life within a lie is characteristic for the great majority of people in Czechoslovakia, and is contrasted with life within the truth, which is characteristic of the dissident movement.

In this paper, I will try to shed some light on the concept of “living with-in a lie”. I will show that Havel develops not one but two concepts of a lie: on the one hand, it is a deliberate pretence; on the other hand, it is seduction through consumerist values. The first meaning is derived from Havel’s analysis of the specifics of Czechoslovakia. The second meaning is heavily influenced by the critical assessments of modern society by the leading figure of the Czech underground movement, Ivan Jirous, and by the pre-eminent Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka. This double meaning of a lie enables Havel to capture both the specific problems of living under the communist regime and the general problems of living in modern society anywhere in the world. In the final sections of this paper I will show some points that are unclear and problems left open in Havel’s concept of living within a lie.

### 1. Fruits and vegetables

“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?”<sup>1</sup> Václav Havel’s answer to this question is rather complex. The manager does not believe in the ideal of the slogan, and he does not want to “acquaint the public” with it. In the late 1970s in Czechoslovakia, almost no one believed in the ideals of communism. Why does he do it, then? The first answer is that he does it with no specific purpose, he acts out of habit, he does not deliberate about it at all, “it has been done that way for years”.<sup>2</sup> The second answer is that he does it out of fear; if he refused, there could be trouble, he might be eventually “relieved of his post as manager”, his salary might be reduced, his vacation plans might be ruined, and his children’s access to higher education might be threatened.<sup>3</sup> The third answer is that the manager pursues a specific kind of life, the “tranquil life ‘in harmony with the society.’”<sup>4</sup>

The exact relationship of these three answers is not crystal clear. However, it is obvious that the answers are not supposed to represent wholly separate motivations but are somehow parts of one complex motivation. The manager is afraid of the consequences of not following the usual practice, but this fear is nothing new to him; it has been omnipresent in the society and in his life for years. Fear is a central aspect of the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia. Therefore he places the slogan in the window without even deliber-

---

1 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, trans. Paul Wilson. *East European Politics and Societies* 32, 2018, No. 2: sec. 3, p. 359, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418766625>.

2 *Ibid.*, sec. 3, p. 359.

3 *Ibid.*, secs. 3, 7.

4 *Ibid.*, sec. 3, p. 359.

ating about it, he has done it many times in the past, and he will do it many times in the future. Placing the slogan is at the same time an integral part of his life; he tries to be a respectable member of society and to have a decent job and a happy family life. Following the usual procedures makes it possible to attain this life.

Picturing the motivation of people living under a communist regime as complex is nothing new for Havel. “The Power of the Powerless” was written at the end of 1978. In his open letter to President Gustáv Husák in April 1975, Havel asks: why do people seemingly support the government?<sup>5</sup> The answer, once again, has many layers. The main driving force of the seemingly pro-government behaviour of the majority of the citizens is fear, mostly based on permanent and omnipresent danger, which is part of everyday life and is not experienced with abrupt intensity but as a “substantial component of the natural world”. This fear has several other components, some of which are existential wrongs such as bullying at work, while others are closer to the brutal force of repressive machinery. Conformity with the regime is influenced also by resignation and indifference to public activity, and by turning one’s attention to private affairs. Acceptance of consumerist ideals also plays an important part in conformity with the regime, and Havel mentions selfish reasons, such as careerism and opportunism, as ingredients in the mixture.

## 2. Ideology and the lie

In section three of “The Power of the Powerless”, Havel portrays life in conformity with the regime and its complex motivation as reflecting “vital interests”. In the following sections of the essay, Havel characterises this life as a “life within a lie” that is “alienated” and “inauthentic”.<sup>6</sup> The latter analysis is central to his understanding of communism and the dissident movement in general.<sup>7</sup> How do “vital interests” change into a “life within a lie”?

The key to understanding this change is Havel’s concept of ideology. “Workers of the world, unite!” is one of the most famous slogans of commu-

5 Havel, V., “Dopis Gustávu Husákovi”, in *O lidskou identitu: Úvahy, Fejetony, Protesty, Polemiky, Prohlášení a Rozhovory z Let 1969–1979*, 3. Praha, Rozmluvy 1990, p. 19–49. For further details about Havel’s open letter, see Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 2012, p. 202–207; Suk, J., *Politika Jako Absurdní Drama: Václav Havel v letech 1975–1989*. Praha, Paseka 2013, p. 25ff.

6 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, secs. 4, 8.

7 For the history of the term “dissent”, see Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 218–220.

nist ideology,<sup>8</sup> and the manager takes part in keeping the ideology and system in power by placing the slogan in his window. Ideology is, according to Havel, a “bridge” between the system and the people.<sup>9</sup> It allows mediation between the aims of the system and the aims of life by pretending that the aims of the system are derived from the aims of life, and by allowing the people to pretend that the aims articulated by ideology are their own. The basic aim of the system is its self-preservation through automatic movement, but this aim is hidden behind the ideology. Although the aim of the system is to maintain itself, it communicates this aim by speaking about the protection of the working class through the leading role of the Communist Party, by speaking about popular government, etc. In the late 1970s in Czechoslovakia, people did not believe in the ideology, but in order not to be in conflict with the system, they had to publicly affirm the ideology, they had to place the slogans, go to the May Day parade, go to the polls, etc. This discrepancy between ideology, on the one hand, and both the aims of the system and the aims of life, on the other, makes the lie a central term of Havel’s analysis. The lie is at the core of the system. Life in conformity with the system is life within a lie.<sup>10</sup>

The key role of the lie is further reinforced by Havel. At first, ideology is understood as a “bridge ... across which the regime approaches people and the people approach the regime”;<sup>11</sup> ideology serves power. This subordination of ideology to power leads to the emancipation of ideology from reality: ideology has to serve power and not primarily reflect reality. However, together with the growing importance of ideology to power, ideology subordinates power to itself: “[R]ather than ... ideology serving power, power begins to serve ideology.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than the bureaucrats in positions of power making decisions, ideology itself makes the decisions and bureaucrats and the people have to accommodate themselves. The ideology becomes a “king-maker.”<sup>13</sup>

Ideology is a key element of the communist regime; it is not only a mediating bridge between power and the people but also the very essence of the regime. Ideology is at the same time necessarily connected to a lie, it reflects neither the aims of political leaders nor the opinions of the people, but both

---

8 Marx, K. and F. Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Vol. One*, trans. Samuel Moore and Frederick Engels. Moscow, Progress Publishers 1969, p. 56.

9 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, sec. 3.

10 *Ibid.*, secs. 4, 5. To characterise life in Czechoslovakia in these terms was perhaps familiar to the readers of Havel’s text, since the regime “institutionalised” some of the most striking lies; see Bolton, J. *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 222–223.

11 Havel, V. “The Power of the Powerless”, sec. 3, p. 360.

12 *Ibid.*, sec. 5, p. 363.

13 *Ibid.*, sec. 5.

leaders and citizens have to act as if they believe in ideology. Since ideology is central to the regime and is connected to a lie, Havel calls life structured by ideology life within a lie.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Complexity and lie

There is no doubt that the lie captures an important aspect of the action of the manager of the fruit-and-vegetable shop. Similar situations were not limited to managers of local stores but were widespread in Czechoslovakia. Even though no one believed the slogan, everyone acted as if they did. There was no one to fool; not even the highest officials wanted you to actually believe the slogan, but everyone had to act as if they did believe,<sup>15</sup> and by doing so they created a “panorama of everyday life”.<sup>16</sup> Such a demand for pretence was not at all exceptional:

[L]ife in the system is so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies: government by bureaucracy is called popular government; the working class is enslaved in the name of the working class; the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his ultimate liberation; depriving people of information is called making it available ... Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.<sup>17</sup>

Although acts of pretence were not exceptional and had a great impact on life under the communist regime, Havel's examples are public activities with a political aspect. We can think of many actions in professional and personal life where no direct pretence was needed: daily routines at work (e.g. replenishing supplies of onions and carrots), going on holiday with the family, helping children prepare for the university entrance exam, furnishing a flat with a new bed, etc. Is it right to call the life of people in Czechoslovakia as life within a lie, when the lie is present only in one domain of life? If we look clos-

---

14 Alexander Solzhenitsyn developed a very similar concept of the lie and its connection to the communist ideology in his text from 1974; Solzhenitsyn, A., “Live Not by Lies”, 21 May 2021, <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/live-not-by-lies>. I want to thank the anonymous reviewer of *Filosofický časopis* for bringing this text to my attention.

15 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, sec. 4.

16 *Ibid.*, sec. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, sec. 4, p. 361.

er at activities in the professional and private spheres, we can see that the lie from the public domain deeply permeates these domains. These professional and private activities were possible only as parts of the overall life within the system, in which actions with important aspects of a lie were necessary. Without placing the slogan, one could not replenish stock as a manager but maybe only as a shop assistant. Without public support for the regime at the managers' meeting, say, it might be difficult, if not impossible, to go on holiday abroad. Without a flawless political profile, the chances of your children being admitted to university are problematic.<sup>18</sup> Without good relations with the caretaker, who is associated with the Communist Party, you might have problems at home. Thus, the nature of the system also permeates many actions that are not subject to straightforward pretence and lying.

Although nearly all actions were necessarily parts of the life in which the lie played a very important role, in order to understand these actions, it is not enough simply to refer to life within a lie. Havel reflects this fact when he describes the multiple motives of the manager and characterises his action as reflecting his “vital interests”. By placing the slogan in the window the manager not only takes part in a lie out of fear, but this activity is also part of furthering his career, he follows his plans to go on holiday abroad, keeps his political profile flawless so his children can go to university, etc. These motives reflecting “vital interests” are more dominant in actions where no direct pretence is present. Going on holiday with the family was possible only in the context of the regime and its demands for pretence, but in order to understand this action, aspects of motivation other than the lie and fear must also be foregrounded. In order to understand the preparation for the university entrance exam, attention should be paid not only to the relevance of the political profile but also to other interests of the parents and their children, their interest in doing a job they like, their interest in specific subjects, their career and financial prospects. The importance of the cottage tradition during the period of so-called normalisation was immense. Although going to the cottage on weekends was very beneficial for the regime's stability (citizens cared more about private affairs and less about public and political life), we have to look to other sources of the cottage tradition to understand it more adequately (e.g. “tramping” movement). Thus, there are many layers of life in conformity with the regime, and “living within a lie” captures only one, however influential, of its facets.

In some parts of “The Power of the Powerless”, Havel is very much aware of the complexity of life in accord with the communist regime. In section six, he says that the dividing line between the aims of the system and the aims

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 7.

of life cannot be drawn between different social groups, but runs through each person. Therefore, it is not possible to characterise life in accordance with the system as life within a lie, because each life in accordance with the regime is a mixture of coerced pretence and the realisation of “vital interests”; it is characteristic both of a lie and of other more or less independent motives.

However, in most cases, Havel seems to make rough distinctions, and speaks as if there is room only for life within a lie or life within the truth. The nuanced and complex view of life in conformity with the system is replaced by the simplifying tendency only to call it life within a lie. In these places, Havel tends to draw the dividing line between living within a lie and living within the truth differently than before. The division does not run through each person but between different people and groups of people: “There are thousands of nameless people who try to live within the truth and millions who want to but cannot.”<sup>19</sup> Life within the truth is sometimes defined negatively as “any means by which a person or group revolts against manipulation.”<sup>20</sup> To live within a lie is to succumb to manipulation, to pretend to believe what you do not believe, to place the slogans in your windows. To live within the truth is to resist manipulation, to not pretend you believe what you do not believe, to stop putting up the slogans, and to stop voting in elections; that are but a farce.<sup>21</sup>

Havel’s emphasis on the binary opposition between people living in accordance with the demands of the system and people resisting the manipulation of the system is understandable in the overall aim of the essay. Havel wants to understand the dissident movement, and one of the most apparent features of dissent is opposition to the demands of the communist regime.<sup>22</sup> These demands touch people with “ideological gloves on”,<sup>23</sup> and ideology plays a central role in Havel’s analysis of the communist regime. Conforming to the demands of the system thus involves claiming allegiance to the ideology that no one believes in. Because Havel wants to give an account of the dissident movement, it is understandable that life within a lie overshadows the complexities of life in accordance with the system, within which the lie plays a decisive but not exclusive role.<sup>24</sup>

---

19 *Ibid.*, sec. 13, p. 381.

20 *Ibid.*, sec. 8, p. 370.

21 *Ibid.*, sec. 7.

22 For Havel’s discussion of opposition, see Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, sec. 12.

23 *Ibid.*, sec. 4.

24 For a critique of Havel’s characterization of dissent by life within a lie and life within the truth, see Rezek, P., “Život Disidentův Jako ‘Život v Pravdě?’” in *Filosofie a Politika* Křče. Praha, Jan Placák – Ztichlá klika 2007, p. 64–85.

#### 4. Truth and lie in the underground and in philosophy

However, there is another reason why Havel characterises life in accordance with the system as life within a lie. The formation of the Czech dissident movement was heavily influenced by the Czech underground movement.<sup>25</sup> This was a mainly music-oriented cultural movement, originating in the late 1960s, that stood as an alternative and in opposition to official culture. The trumped-up criminal trial of members of the underground movement (known as The Trial of the Plastic People) led to the formation of the leading dissident initiative Charter 77, and some of the thinking supporting the underground was appropriated and transformed into dissent.

Ivan Martin Jirous, known as “Magor” (this might be translated as “Loo-ny”), was a leading intellectual figure in the Czech underground movement. In his most famous theoretical treatise on the underground, “Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival” (1975), Magor characterised the underground as an effort to “live within the truth”<sup>26</sup> with a radical rejection of any concessions to the establishment.<sup>27</sup> Magor thought that the Devil speaks in disguise as the establishment, and that in order to live within the truth, one has to resist the temptation to make any compromises with consumerist society.<sup>28</sup>

Magor met Havel in 1976 and gave him his “Report”, and the meeting of two prominent figures of the underground and dissident movement had a formative influence on further developments in Czechoslovakia.<sup>29</sup> There are several similarities between Magor’s thoughts in the “Report” and Havel’s thoughts in “The Power of the Powerless”. Both members of the underground and members of the dissident movement are characterised as trying to live the truth. Living within the truth is in both cases connected to opposing the demands of seeming authorities. However, there are also differences at first sight. In the case of dissent, authority is represented by the ideology of the communist regime; in the case of the underground, authority is the establishment and consumerist society. According to Magor, the underground is in opposition to the establishment both in the East and, no less importantly, in the West.<sup>30</sup> According to Havel, ideology is specific to the East,<sup>31</sup> and opposition to the communist regime thus has a unique character.

---

25 For details about the influence of the underground on the dissident movement, see Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 115ff, and especially p. 139–143.

26 Jirous, I. M., “Zpráva o Třetím Českém Hudebním Obrození”, in *Magorův Zápiskník*, ed. Michael Špirit. Praha, Torst 1997, sec. 1.

27 *Ibid.*, sec. 5.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 135.

30 Jirous, I. M., “Zpráva o Třetím Českém Hudebním Obrození”, sec. 13.

31 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, secs. 1, 5.



However, “The Power of the Powerless” also contains a different tendency to characterise living within the truth, one that is very similar to Magor’s views. On the one hand, Havel characterises the communist regime through a specific ideology, not transferable to the West. On the other hand, he understands the system in Czechoslovakia as being “built on the foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society”.<sup>32</sup> Havel makes his understanding of the problem we face even more similar to Magor’s, when he sees the problem with the system in the East as an “inflated caricature of modern life in general” and a “kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies”.<sup>33</sup> The specifics of the system in the East, i.e. its specific ideology, is not the real problem. The essential problem of the regime is not at all limited to the East; it is “the crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole”.<sup>34</sup>

Havel thus provides two analyses of the problem we face. On the one hand, he emphasises communist ideology. On the other hand, he criticises modern technological and consumerist society as a whole, in which communist ideology has no central role. When ideology is in the foreground, the lie turns out to be a central feature, since pretence is demanded from everyone living in a system controlled by ideology. The concept of a lie and the truth in this context is rather simple and mundane: consciously pretending is a lie, not pretending, i.e. resisting the false demands of the ideology, is truth.<sup>35</sup> When ideology is not in the foreground, the concept of a lie is not so obviously at hand to characterise life within the system.

We have already seen that Magor uses the concept of “living within the truth” as the opposite of life according to the establishment and its consumerist demands. Havel develops a similar concept in “The Power of the Powerless”. Besides the influence of the underground, philosophical thinking on the nature of the contemporary crisis and alternatives to it had a major impact on this aspect of Havel’s essay. He explicitly relates the idea that “technological society” is at the core of the crisis to the ideas of Martin Heidegger.<sup>36</sup> However, in the Czech dissident movement these thoughts were mainly mediated and developed through the work and lectures of Jan Patočka, a student of Husserl and Heidegger at Freiburg and, together with Havel and Jiří Hájek, one of the first three spokesmen of Charter 77. Havel

---

32 Ibid., sec. 6, p. 367.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., sec. 20, p. 403.

35 Ibid., secs. 8, 15. For a critique of this concept of truth and lie within dissent, see Pithart, P., “Dizi-Rizika”, in *O Svobodě a Moci*, by Adolf Müller and Václav Havel, Doba: Sv. 8. Köln/Roma, Index/Listy 1980, sec. 2; Rezek, P., “Život Disidentův Jako ‘Život v Pravdě?’” p. 73, 76–79.

36 Havel, V. “The Power of the Powerless”, sec. 20.

was heavily influenced by Patočka, and even dedicated “The Power of the Powerless” “to the memory of Jan Patočka”, since Patočka’s recent death was very much present in the atmosphere of late 1970s.<sup>37</sup>

Patočka’s *Heretical Essays* (1975) analyses modern society in terms of technological civilisation and suggests that humankind is under the threat of a complete orientation towards everyday concerns on the one hand and orgasmic and demonic outbursts on the other. Technological civilisation emphasises the satisfaction of the individual’s ever-clamouring needs and desires and orients people from the search for the meaning of the world towards constant preoccupation with the everyday. The other threat of technological civilisation is that it changes everything into mere force, which sometimes needs to be unchained on a great scale in order to discharge itself. The greatest release of force occurs during world wars, which change even human beings into mere force that discharges itself in mutual conflict.<sup>38</sup>

*Heretical Essays* also contains one of the central ideas of Patočka’s thought: the concept of the three fundamental movements of human life. From the perspective of this paper, the third and highest movement, the “movement of truth”, has major relevance. For Patočka, life within the truth is oriented from the world towards its transcendental source, from manifestation towards Being, which makes every manifestation possible.<sup>39</sup> The movement of truth is thus the opposite of the tendency of technological civilisation, i.e. it is the opposite of the orientation of life towards immersion in the world of everyday things and basic needs.<sup>40</sup>

Although there are important differences between Magor, Patočka and Havel in their respective concepts of living within the truth,<sup>41</sup> they all contrast it with the tendency of technological society. However, unlike Havel, neither Magor nor Patočka use “living within a lie” to characterise life in accordance with the system. For Patočka, the movement of truth is the highest

---

37 For details of the role of Patočka in dissent and details of his death, see Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 143–147, 155–160.

38 Patočka, J., *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. James Dodd. Chicago, Open Court 1996, chap. 5, “Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?” At the same time, technological civilisation provides, according to Patočka, a great opportunity for humankind by allowing the majority of people to see the depth of the crisis (Patočka, chap. 6, “Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War”). This motif is also present in Havel’s thinking, but following it would lead us astray from the topic of this paper.

39 Patočka, J., *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, chap. 2.

40 For further discussion of the philosophical influences on “The Power of the Powerless”, see Karfíková, L., “Intence Života: Filosofická Východiska Havlovy Moci Bezmocných”, in *Jednoho Dne Se v Našem Zeliní Čosi Vzbouří: Eseje o Moci Bezmocných*, eds. Jiří Suk and Kristina Andělová. Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v.v.i. 2016, p. 101–107.

41 For the differences between Patočka’s and Havel’s concept of life within the truth, see Rezek, P., “Život Disidentův Jako ‘Život v Pravdě?’”, p. 65–71.

of the three fundamental movements of life, the other two being the movement of acceptance and the movement of defence.<sup>42</sup> The movement of truth is always present but is often subordinated to the other two movements.<sup>43</sup> For Patočka, the alternative to living within a truth is not living within a lie, but rather life that has at its centre the movement of acceptance or defence. For Magor, the alternative to the underground and living within the truth is mass culture, consumer society and living according to the demands of the establishment.<sup>44</sup>

There is therefore a double meaning to Havel's concept of living within a lie. The first is developed in reaction to the concept of ideology: living in a lie means deliberately pretending that you believe in the communist ideology, even though no one does. The second is opposition to the authentic life: life within a lie is life seduced by consumption and characterised by a preoccupation with the everyday, and is contrasted with authentic, positive, and responsible life.<sup>45</sup> These two accounts amply complement each other. The characterisation of life in accordance with the system as life structured by pretence captures a pervasive aspect of life under communism, but it oversimplifies the "vital interests" of such a life, as we pointed out in section 3 of this paper. Characterising life in accordance with the system as a surrender to consumption and the everyday pays attention to some of the neglected aspects of the first characterisation but fails to highlight the specifics of life in the East. Although different, these two concepts of life within a lie thus enable Havel to highlight both the general problems of modern society present in both the East and the West (consumerism, technological civilisation) and the specific problems peculiar to the Soviet sphere of influence (communist ideology and pretence).

## 5. East and West

In previous sections of this paper, I used "technological society" and "consumerism" as the two main concepts of Havel's characterisation of the crisis present both in the East and in the West. Although these two concepts are prominent in the essay, Havel uses many others to describe the crisis and its causes. He speaks about industrial society,<sup>46</sup> inauthentic life,<sup>47</sup> alienation,<sup>48</sup>

---

42 Patočka, J., *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, chap. 2, p. 29.

43 *Ibid.*, chap. 2, p. 33.

44 Jirous, I. M., "Zpráva o Třetím Českém Hudebním Obrození", sec. 5.

45 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless", secs. 8, 9, 12, 18.

46 *Ibid.*, sec. 2.

47 *Ibid.*, sec. 6.

48 *Ibid.*, secs. 6–8.

moral crisis and the lack of higher responsibility,<sup>49</sup> manipulation,<sup>50</sup> modern science and modern metaphysics, enslavement, the “coldly functioning machine”, and the inability of humanity to master its own situation.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, Havel does not go into the details of how exactly these concepts hold together and create one problem, but it is clear that he considers them to be aspects of a single phenomenon.

Havel’s most elaborate effort to show the fundamental problem of the East and the West is in section 20. Here, he identifies the core of the crisis as being the manipulation of the people in technological civilisation, so that “modern humanity” is unable “to be the master of its own situation”. In the West this manipulation is, according to Havel, “infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies”. It is carried out by mass political parties, by the centres of capital, consumption and advertising, and by a flood of information.

In the East the manipulation is similar in terms of consumption. A person living in the East “has been seduced by the consumer value system”.<sup>52</sup> Havel is a bit ambiguous as to the source of the consumerist nature of the East. In “The Power of the Powerless” it seems that consumerism precedes the post-totalitarian system and is adopted by it, as it were, from the outside. Consumption is a prerequisite for post-totalitarian society: “[T]he post-totalitarian system has been built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society. Is it not true that the far-reaching adaptability to living a lie and the effortless spread of social auto-totally have some connection with the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity? With their willingness to surrender higher values when faced with the trivializing temptations of modern civilization?”<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, there is a tendency to see consumerism as an effect of the specific nature of the communist regime. In his open letter to President Husák in 1975, Havel speaks about the cause of people’s turning away from the public sphere into the refuge of the private domain and into consumption behaviour. The cause of this turn is closely connected to historical developments in Czechoslovakia. The cause of consumerist behaviour is a loss of faith in the future, in the possibility of a rectification of public affairs. This loss of faith is in turn the consequence of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by

---

49 *Ibid.*, sec. 9.

50 *Ibid.*, secs. 15, 20.

51 *Ibid.*, sec. 20.

52 *Ibid.*, sec. 9.

53 *Ibid.*, sec. 6, p. 367.

Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 and the subsequent “normalisation” era of the political system, in which the leaders did not want the people to interfere in public affairs.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from consumerism, Havel places great emphasis on the role of communist ideology in the manipulation of the people in the East, as we have seen in section 2 of this paper. In the East, this manipulation thus has two major forms: one is manipulation by the consumerism of technological civilisation; the other is ideological demands for pretence. These two forms are connected: ideological demands can be effective either because the people are ready not to engage in politics in order to secure consumerist well-being or because the demands of ideological pretence make people resort to the private sphere and consumerism. We will consider this double role of consumerism in the final section of this paper.

What is the relationship between manipulation in the East and manipulation in the West? Sometimes it seems as if Havel thinks that the problems of the East and the West are only seemingly specific but are in fact shared. He claims sometimes that the specific problems of the East are but intensified problems of a general kind. He sees the communist regime as “merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological civilization”.<sup>55</sup> However, instead of shoving in some details that the problems of the East are actually only extreme versions of the general problems of our era, Havel spares no effort in picturing the problems as resulting from the specific political situation of the East. These problems are, as we saw in section 2, connected to the communist ideology and its unique role in the system. How can the demands for ideological pretence be understood without these specifics?

There may be a similar difficulty with the problems of the West. From the list provided by Havel in section 20 of “The Power of the Powerless”, only one kind of problem is explicitly shared by the West and the East: consumerism. What about other problems in the West? For example, there is the “flood of information”, a problem we experience even more intensively today. This problem was unique to the West and not present in the East, where information was very strictly regulated. Can we understand this problem if we concentrate on the problem common to the East and the West?

Havel’s analysis of the relationship between the problems of the East and the problems of the West is not always that these are only variants of the same problem of manipulation. In some passages it seems that some prob-

---

54 Havel, V., “Dopis Gustávu Husákovi” (Open Letter to Gustav Husák), p. 4. For further information about this topic, see Suk, J., *Politika Jako Absurdní Drama*, p. 30–31.

55 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, sec. 20, p. 404.

lems of the East and the West are not shared, that there are actually problems specific to the East and specific to the West, but that these specific problems are not the most serious ones. By solving specific problems one does not solve the gravest problems of our societies. In this context Havel writes that if it were possible to create “democracy in some countries of the Soviet bloc ..., it might be an appropriate transitional solution”, but it would be “at the very least short-sighted” to set “traditional parliamentary democracy as one’s political ideal”.<sup>56</sup> The return of traditional democracy might be helpful but “would provide no permanent solution to the most important problems”.<sup>57</sup>

The most serious problems are found in either variant of the relationship shared by the East and the West. These consist in living an inauthentic, alienated life in consumer society, which is not limited to a specific political system. To solve these problems, it is therefore necessary not to think in traditional political terms, because any abstract political programme can easily degenerate into “new forms of human enslavement”.<sup>58</sup> Solving the gravest problem in the East is not possible by a change of politics in the traditional way; this would be “utterly inadequate”: “For some time now, the problem has no longer resided in a political line or program.”<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Havel’s proposed solution to the most important problem is not based on a political programme of the traditional kind. Instead, there have to be “profound existential and moral changes in society”, which consist in “the fundamental reconstitution of the position of people in the world, their relationships to themselves and to each other, and to the universe”.<sup>60</sup> Only after this existential change occurs, or at best along with it, might some political consequences be drawn, not vice versa: The “approach, in which people are first organized in one way or another ... so they may then allegedly be liberated, is something we have known on our own skins only too well”.<sup>61</sup>

The real solution to the crisis cannot be sought in a “revolution that is merely philosophical, merely social, merely technological, or even merely political”.<sup>62</sup> The priority of existential revolution over any political solution of the problem gives rise to Havel’s unwillingness to think about the political organisation of society in advance. We shall think about political solutions

---

56 *Ibid.*, sec. 20, p. 404–405.

57 *Ibid.*, sec. 11, p. 377.

58 *Ibid.*, sec. 11, p. 376.

59 *Ibid.*, sec. 16, p. 387.

60 *Ibid.*, sec. 11, p. 377.

61 *Ibid.*, sec. 16, p. 388.

62 *Ibid.*, sec. 20, p. 403.

only in a particular situation, when we face the specific task: “It would be presumptuous, however, to try to foresee the structural expressions of this new spirit without that spirit actually being present and without knowing its concrete physiognomy.”<sup>63</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Václav Havel starts his analysis of the dissident movement and the communist regime by pointing out their specific features. He speaks about dissent as the “inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system”,<sup>64</sup> and he distinguishes the communist regime from other dictatorships as a post-totalitarian system.<sup>65</sup> At the end of his essay, Havel connects his analysis of communism and dissent with the crisis of technological civilisation in general, and with its alternative. He explicitly places demands of generality on his analysis,<sup>66</sup> and he thinks about the dissident movement as a “rudimentary prefiguration”, as a “model” for the general solution of the crisis,<sup>67</sup> a crisis not specific to the East but one affecting the technological civilization present throughout the world.<sup>68</sup>

Following this change in understanding of the crisis, Havel develops the two concepts of a lie. Most of his essay is dedicated to an analysis of the communist regime, in which ideology plays a central role, and in this context, the meaning of a lie is a conscious pretence. Havel develops the other meaning of a lie together with his adoption of some of the thoughts of the underground movement and phenomenological philosophy. According to this analysis, the problem is technological civilisation and its consumerist ideals, and it is thus not limited to the East but is present all over the world. A lie in this context means to orient oneself to the everyday in opposition to an orientation to the meaning of the world; to live within a lie is to immerse oneself in the world of things, to sink into consumerism.

The relationship between these two concepts of a lie is not clear. Sometimes it seems that Havel thinks that the first meaning is but a radical version of the second one, that pretence is a variant of sinking into consumer-

---

63 *Ibid.*, sec. 21, p. 407. Compare also sec. 19.

64 *Ibid.*, sec. 1, p. 355.

65 *Ibid.*, sec. 2.

66 *Ibid.*, sec. 18.

67 *Ibid.*, secs. 21–22.

68 However, Havel connects the East and the West from the beginning of his essay, e.g. in section 2, Havel says that the Soviet sphere of influence “is simply another form of the consumer and industrial society”. Nevertheless, in the beginning his emphasis is on the specific features of the East, mainly on ideology.

ism. However, it is not clear from Havel's essay how to understand ideological pretence in terms of consumerism. The other way in which Havel understands their relationship is that ideological pretence is a specific, but not the most important, problem of the East. The most important problem is the second concept of a lie, a problem common to both the East and the West. We should therefore concentrate on the second problem instead of on the first, that is, we should concentrate on the problem of consumerist and technological society. According to Havel, this problem does not have a political solution. The way to deal with it is through existential and moral revolution; a political solution must at best accompany this more fundamental change and not structure it or precede it.

In conclusion, I want to formulate three questions with respect to Havel's scepticism towards political solutions. First, from the perspective of his scepticism, it is not clear how one should deal with the first concept of a lie, pretence arising from the demands of the ideologically driven communist regime. Havel pictures in great detail how devastating the necessity to lie is to the society and to individuals under the communist regime. Is it not worth the effort to try to politically change the regime so that ideological pretence is no longer central to the lives of the people? Such political change does not solve all the problems of the society. Is it so marginal that we should not concentrate on political solutions to this problem?

Second, can we be sure that the problems of consumerism have no political solution? In section 5 of this paper I noted that, in his earlier text, the open letter to President Husák, Havel suggests that consumerism arises from specific developments in Czechoslovakia. The occupation of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent "normalisation" period had the effect that people resigned from caring for public affairs and concentrated instead on their private lives. What arguments does Havel have to show that political measures cannot help to solve the alienation of the people and their sinking into consumerism, if political measures probably gave rise to this problem or at least intensified it?

Third, Havel was the single most influential figure during the Velvet Revolution of 1989. As Jiří Suk meticulously shows in his book *Into the Labyrinth of Revolution*, Havel's thinking had great impact on the transitional period in Czechoslovakia.<sup>69</sup> As we have seen, Havel was sceptical about the possibility of thinking about politics in advance. Even at the very end of "The Power of the Powerless", when he dares to draw some "political consequences" from his analysis of society, his "political" suggestions are far-fetched. He does not

---

69 Suk, J. *Labyrintem Revoluce: Aktéři, Zápletky a Křížovatky Jedné Politické Krize: (Od Listopadu 1989 Do Června 1990)*, Obzor: Sv. 50. Praha, Prostor 2003.



elaborate on the system of political parties, the organisation of the economy, the position of public broadcasting, etc. Instead, he pictures the ideal society as an extension of small, informal dissident groups, which will come into existence and dissolve according to actual need, and which will be held together by shared feelings and not by any formal rules, organised around a leader's authority without a set position.<sup>70</sup> It is clear that Havel initiated and materialised many of the most important changes in Czechoslovakia. Could he have been better prepared for this position had he made more room for traditional political thinking?<sup>71</sup>

## References

- Benda, Václav. "Paralelní Polis". In *O Svobodě a Moci*, by Adolf Müller and Václav Havel, 101–129. Doba: Sv. 8. Köln; Roma: Index; Listy, 1980.
- Bolton, Jonathan. *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Havel, Václav. "Dopis Gustávu Husákovi". In *O lidskou Identitu: Úvahy, Fejetony, Protesty, Polemiky, Prohlášení a Rozhovory z Let 1969–1979*, 3., 19–49. Praha: Rozmluvy, 1990.
- ———. "The Power of the Powerless". Translated by Paul Wilson. *East European Politics and Societies* 32, no. 2 (2018): 353–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418766625>.
- Jirouš, Ivan Martin. "Zpráva o Třetím Českém Hudebním Obrození". In *Magorův Zápisník*. Edited by Michael Špirit, 171–98. Praha: Torst, 1997.
- Karfíková, Lenka. "Intence Života: Filosofická Východiska Havlovy Moci Bezmocných". In *Jednoho Dne Se v Našem Zelináři Cosi Vzbouří: Eseje o Moci Bezmocných*. Edited by Jiří Suk and Kristina Andělová, 101–107. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v.v.i., 2016.

---

70 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless", secs. 21–22. For a critical discussion of the idealisation of dissident structures, see Pithart, P., "Dizi-Rizika", sec. 3; for a critique of the generalisation of the dissident experience, see Suk, J., *Politika Jako Absurdní Drama*, p. 12. Cf. the famous dissident concept of the parallel polis, in Benda, V. "Paralelní Polis", in *O Svobodě a Moci*, by Adolf Müller and Václav Havel, Doba: Sv. 8. Köln/Roma, Index/Listy 1980, p. 101–29.

71 I want to thank Tomáš Hejduk for his helpful comments on drafts of this paper. This paper was supported within the project of Operational Programme Research, Development and Education (OP VVV/OP RDE), "Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value", registration No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/15\_003/0000425, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and the state budget of the Czech Republic.

- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. “Manifesto of the Communist Party”. In *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Vol. One*. Translated by Samuel Moore and Frederick Engels, 98–137. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969.
- Patočka, Jan. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Translated by James Dodd. Chicago: Open Court, 1996.
- Pithart, Petr. “Dizi-Rizika”. In *O Svobodě a Moci*, by Adolf Müller and Václav Havel, 269–273. Doba: Sv. 8. Köln/Roma: Index; Listy, 1980.
- Rezek, Petr. “Život Disidentův Jako ‘Život v Pravdě’?” In *Filosofie a Politika Kýče*, 64–85. Praha: Jan Placák – Ztichlá klika, 2007.
- Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr. “Live Not by Lies”, 21 May 2021. <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/live-not-by-lies>.
- Suk, Jirí. *Labyrintem Revoluce: Aktéři, Zápletky a Křižovatky Jedné Politické Krize: (Od Listopadu 1989 Do Června 1990)*. Obzor: Sv. 50. Praha: Prostor, 2003.
- ——. *Politika Jako Absurdní Drama: Václav Havel v letech 1975–1989*. Praha: Paseka, 2013.

Orcid: 0000-0001-8071-8618