Editorial: Resounding the Powerless

No society, no matter how technologically advanced, can function without a moral basis, which is not a matter of opportunity, circumstances or anticipated beliefs. However, morality is not here to make society function, but simply because it makes a human being human.

Jan Patočka

Václav Havel's "The Power of the Powerless" ("Moc bezmocných") was written in 1978.[1] Initially, the text was intended for a Polish/Czechoslovakian volume on freedom and power in which all participants would have access to, and comment on, Havel's text. The project didn't reach its conclusion, as only the Czechoslovakian side of the collaboration managed to complete its task.[2] The essay was eventually published as a samizdat, along with nine written responses, shortly after Havel's arrest in 1979. "The Power of the Powerless" quickly took on a status of being one of those text that is necessary to read for anyone interested in power relations in contemporary society. But what is its value today?

In November 2019, two groups of philosophers (one from the Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value, University of Pardubice, Czech Republic, and the other from the Department of Philosophy, Södertörn University, Sweden), who in various ways have taken an interest in the philosophies of Havel,

1 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless". *East European Politics and Societies*, 32, 2018, No. 2, p. 353–408, doi:10.1177/0888325418766625.

2 Havel, V. and Wilson, P., "Translator's Introduction to the 1991 Edition", in "The Power of the Powerless" [special issue], *East European Politics and Societies*, 32, 2018, No. 2, 353–408, https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418766625.

Jan Patočka and Ladislav Hejdánek, rehearsed the exercise to write articles on "The Power of the Powerless" and gather to talk them through, embarrassingly enough without knowing that the same strategy actually had led to the birth of the text that we focused on. The choice of text was not made in order to imitate its origin, but rather was rooted in a shared sense that this still is a central text, and one whose centrality is even more obvious now than it was a decade or two ago. We gathered only a few days after 17 Listopad (17 November), the Czech Day of Freedom and Democracy (Den boje za svobodu a demokracii), and shortly after history had repeated itself with mass demonstrations in Letna Park in Prague, making the impression of the text's relevance even stronger.[3] The questions of the legitimacy and nature of political power and the shape and hope for a democracy are not questions that will go away, and it might be fair to say that concepts such as "power" and "democracy" are concepts that each generation may have to work with, transform and make their own. As the world turns, so do our concepts, and so power relations will transform, which in turn means that democracy may have to be earned over and over again.

It was with some concern that we went into this project, since only a few philosophical essays allow themselves to be opened up in so many ways, and to provoke so much thought, as to lend themselves to be the focal object of a number of articles and days of discussion. "The Power of the Powerless" proved to have that power.

That is not necessarily evident, since one may think that Havel's text is uniquely tied to its rather specific context: what Havel himself would call a "post-totalitarian regime" and the efforts to contest it and find new openings for an ethico-political thinking and way of living that could follow after it – which were the central efforts of Charter 77. The Charter provides a rather unique setting for that kind of thinking, and Havel's close collaborations with prominent thinkers such as Jan Patočka and Ladislav Hejdánek are clearly visible in "The Power of the Powerless", not only in the fact that it is dedicated to Patočka but also in picking up thrust from their conversations and by means of lending some central thoughts and notions from phenomenological thinking.

3 The history of the Day of Freedom and Democracy goes back to 17 November 1939, when a massive student demonstration was held to protest the Nazi occupation. This date was therefore named "International Student's Day" in 1941. It was named "The Day of Freedom and Democracy" to commemorate another major student demonstration, held on 17 November 1989, in which opposition to the communist regime and the demand to free Czechoslovakia from the bonds to the communist bloc took centre stage, a demonstration that can rightfully be considered the starting point of the Velvet Revolution.

One may say that Charter 77 has at least two trademarks: it was meant to be both a non-political and a non-hierarchical organisation. It was therefore also central to their aim *not* to side with any ideology and to refrain from developing their own. Yet, Charter 77 also, quite clearly, had political ambitions of some sort, aiming, at the very least, to put oppressive and limiting political structures on display and marking out the dangers of current (and future) oppressive forms of power. Thus, the Chartist efforts to pursue a non-political politics that evidently calls for, or aims to make room for, some rather drastic political changes, lead us to reflect upon power relations and pre-political textures, where existential, political and ethical concerns are allowed to come forth as intermingled, not only with each other but also with questions about language, symbolism and truth. What emerges in Havel's analysis of his context, and what the efforts to prepare the ground for a "non-political politics" point towards, is not an attempt to simply say that the personal *is* political, or that all political issues are at bottom existential; rather, it is the call for efforts to unearth the kinds of moral and political undercurrents (of language and life and culture) that are not immediately seen as direct exercises of either power or resistance. The papers collected here are investigations into how these forms of interconnection and intertwining between ethics, existential concerns, authenticity, language, meaning and truth look.

Tomáš Hejduk's "What Existentialism in Havel's Concept of Dissent? Hejdánek's Critique of Havel" localises a form of tension within Havel's position. On the one hand, Havel emphasises the moral and existential ways of thinking and being that characterise "the dissident". On the other, he does not wish to speak from the moral high ground. These questions lead us directly into questions about the possibility and nature of the idea of a non-political politics and how such a view, central to the Charter, actually would be different from "normal" or "traditional" politics. Hejdánek argued that Havel had a tendency to focus too heavily on the self and issues of subjectivity, a focus that also had some serious reverberations in Havel's understanding of what non-political politics might be and how the project of Charter 77 was different from "politics." Drawing on Hejdánek's thought that morals must be outward-oriented, aiming away from the self, Hejduk argues that what is missing in Havel's concept of the power of the powerless is a clear understanding of how help from outside, from others, is needed for the most powerless (which means to suggest that the inward orientation of Havel's thinking won't be enough), and that there is too strong a focus on individual motivation, which induces a form of lack of realism.

Gustav Strandberg's essay, "From a 'Life in the Idea' to a 'Life in Truth': Patočka and Havel on Truth and Politics", traces Patočka's influence on Havel's

thinking. Strandberg reveals a "conceptual genealogy" of some of Havel's most central thoughts. In particular, Havel's central notion of a "life in truth" is traced back to Patočka's reflections on a "life in the idea" and a "life in problematicity". Strandberg points out how questions of morality and thus of authenticity, which in Havel's view precedes the political, is pre-political. And this clearly marks out one way to understand Charter's ambition to be non-political. The "dissident" is thus not characterised as someone who is against this or that ideology, but is rather to be seen as someone who is against all tendencies to subsume existential questions to politics. Questions of truth are thus intimately tied to questions of moral authenticity.

It is also possible to trace these lines of thinking back to Patočka's earlier writings, but, as Strandberg points out, Patočka's later writings contain a severe critique of essentialist efforts to define human subjectivity, and Patočka also comes to emphasise the importance of uncertainty and negativity. Thus, there is a question about how well Patočka's later views resonate with those of Havel. Strandberg points out that Patočka's developed thinking suggests that there may be something naive about Havel's notion of truth, since it relies on a problematic idea of the authentic self (in contrast to Patočka's view in which a "life in the idea" implies a life without certainty and truth).

Havel's notion of truth is further examined by Ondřej Krása, who, in "Two Concepts of a Lie: Václav Havel on Living in a Communist Regime", argues that there are two distinct concepts of "lie" in play in Havel's discussions about what it means to live in a lie. One is the familiar notion of intentionally misleading or deliberate pretence. The other is a form of seduction by consumerist values. Krása shows how the idea of a life "within truth" is not merely a philosophical idea, in the sense of being developed by philosophers, but also has roots in underground musical movements, where The Plastic People of the Universe played a crucial role. In particular, Havel's meeting with Ivan Martin Jirous, who, among other things, served as the artistic director for The Plastic People, had also involved discussion of the underground movement as an effort to seek a life within truth. And, much like Havel, Jirous also thought that the problems they faced were not restricted to their own post-totalitarian situation but were rooted in contemporary technological-industrial society at large. This is central to their thought that the consumerist society of the West was not really a viable alternative to communism, and, as Krása argues, this sense of a life in a lie also helps us understand why the "revolution" needed to be existential rather than political.

In "Among the Onions and Carrots" by Niklas Forsberg we see an effort to elucidate the kind of seeping nature of power that is characteristic of Havel's analysis of the post-totalitarian state (and consumerist society), in which

power is not tied to individuals or individual actions but is rather to be seen as structural and cultural. Central to the argument here is how small, seemingly harmless deeds partake in upholding the structures of power. This is also why Havel's greengrocer is so central to the text. What is important to take note of is that there is a form of harmlessness that characterises the greengrocer's putting up the sign. That workers of the world should unite is, in its literal sense, not necessarily an endorsement of the oppressive regime. So the relevant moral failure of the greengrocer is not that he utters a lie, or pretends to endorse a doctrine he honestly doesn't believe in. The moral failure, to the extent that we can call it that, is thus a form of blind trust in semantics. Coming to clarity about the kind of lie that is involved here includes taking responsibility for one's language in a much richer and broader sense than its "semantic" level. The attainment of a sense beyond semantics, and of wide connotative connections, is thus central to the effort required for a life within truth. Havel can thereby be said to have described features of power structures that reach far beyond "willfully performed acts", and he has uncovered registers of our lives in language that are moral in a sense far more profound than the idea of a lie as the utterance of a false sentence, and of truth as the utterance of a true sentence. These two findings are central to, but not by any means restricted to, the post-totalitarian situation.

From the above, it is quite evident that the kinds of explorations of our political landscape that Havel encourages are not limited to the post-totalitarian political regime of post-war Czechoslovakia. Antony Fredriksson furthers this project, of making attention to the powerless of great importance for contemporary philosophical discourse on politics, by reflecting on the roots of totalitarian forms of thinking per se. Fredriksson's paper, "Václav Havel, Simone Weil and our Desire for Totalitarianism", demonstrates how both Havel and Weil point to ideology's tendency to cancel out subjectivity as one of the most central features of totalitarian power structures. One of the things that Fredriksson picks up on in Havel is his idea that the power structures that characterise post-totalitarian regimes are not local phenomena, tied only to communist societies, but belong to capitalist forms of governance in the "liberal West" too. Attaining a sense of self and establishing an authentic life are difficulties that recur in all forms of society where there are tensions between the official ideology and a parallel polis. At this point, the parallel with Weil's thinking comes to the fore, for she offers us similar analyses of how the logic of alienation is tied to false images of belonging and rootedness. For both Havel and Weil, the route out of alienation is existential rather than ideological. This also helps us to see how authoritarianism feeds on crises – when the need for external rules and orders be-

comes most tempting – and it also helps to unearth part of the "appeal" of authoritarian power structures: the promise of a kind of freedom, a freedom from disorder. That Charter 77 was adamant in stressing that the route forward in politics was, in a sense, not political but apolitical is, Fredriksson shows, precisely tied to the recognition that ideological paths to freedom harbour misunderstandings of what real freedom is. A more genuine "sense of rootedness, community and belonging", Fredriksson argues, is "achieved through acknowledging this moral propensity that is not set by any given rules applied by jurisdiction and force".

Ulrika Björk's paper, "The Dissident and the Spectre: Reading Havel with Derrida", asks the question why the notion of the "dissident" is introduced as a spectre, with an obvious reference to Marx's manifesto. A central aspect of her answer to that question is that Havel's efforts to open up for a different order are centrally characterised by the *lack* of ideology, and hence the lack of a clear idea to be realised. This means that the notion of democracy and the idea of an open society are ideas that always, in a peculiar sense, move ahead of us. The "dissident" is not someone who demands a specific *x*, and feels content when that is achieved. For these reasons, Jacques Derrida's reflections on a democracy (that is always) "to come" help articulate Havel's non-ideological political work. Björk argues that there is an affinity between the dissident in Havel's essay and the spectre in Derrida's readings of Marx. Both evoke Walter Benjamin's historiography, and both are manifestations of a specific modern temporality that Derrida calls "disjointed", because it is haunted by a revolutionary force and claim for justice. Charter 77, rightly understood, is essentially "nonpolitical" in that it anticipates the renewal of moral experiences of responsibility and solidarity. What makes the dissident "haunting" then is his or her lack of ideology, a lack that may prove to be one of the most effective and necessary means to make room for a democracy to come.[4]

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