

Among the Onions and Carrots

The “dissident” and the countersignature of post-totalitarianism

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Abstract:

This paper explores the notion of “power” prevalent in Václav Havel’s understanding of the post-totalitarian regime. With this notion of power, which is “seeping” in nature, rather than rooted solely in an individual agent’s actions, the role of the individual in the formation of the political “we” becomes a central issue. The starting point is Havel’s well-known example of “the greengrocer,” that illustrate how Havel pictures the way out of the post-totalitarian regime as one in which individuals move from *living a lie* to *living in truth*. I show how Havel’s talk about truth and authenticity, and his emphasis on a life in truth (which may appear judgemental, naive and cliché-like) is best understood. The wrong way to understand this is simply to say that people who merely obeyed that government, as the greengrocer did, are to be held accountable because they did not put up a fight against their oppressor. Such an understanding goes wrong because it fails to take into account the complexity of the relationship between power and language. In contrast to this, I argue that the central issue here is not that particular agents are to be held responsible for countersigning messages that they think are false. More precisely, I argue that the moral difficulty here is that the greengrocer’s deeds, which appear as countersignatures of the regime, are possible because the messages conveyed are “innocent” on the surface, in a “literal” sense. The moral dimension of the greengrocer’s actions, aiming to shed light on the complex relation between the government and the individual, is revealed as located in a field of tension between inherited sense and new projections. This, in turn, can help us to see the real nature of the transition Havel’s grocer undergoes when he moves from *living a lie* to *living in truth*. It is not a matter of negating a false statement or utterance, nor of replacing it with a true one. It is a matter of realising that the responsibility for meaning is, ultimately, ours – and that the way in which he, the grocer, is one of us is something that has to be earned.

Keywords: Havel, meaning, power/knowledge, ideology, truth, authenticity

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1. The seeping power

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and after Foucault (who serves at least as a name for this discovery), it is very easy to see that one of the most dangerous forms of political power is not the power of the “royal” intervention, where a strong and brutal man acts and then retreats to the comfort of his fortress, but rather the forms of pressure that do not feel like pressure, the forms of intervention that do not look like interventions, that is, power that is seeping. Systems can be just as powerful and frightening as dictators.

Václav Havel’s essay “The Power of the Powerless” is a document that testifies to the importance of this recognition.¹ As far as I know, Havel had not read Foucault by the time he wrote “The Power of the Powerless”. We know, of course (for example, through the works of Jan Patočka), that classic phenomenology (such as Husserl and Heidegger) and early existentialist thinking (such as Sartre) were known, studied and discussed, and we also know that Havel had read some Levinas (since he mentions his work in letters to his brother during the time he was imprisoned in the 1980s). But, to my knowledge, Foucault was not read, and his texts were not translated into Czech at that point, which means that he was not widely read and discussed. That, however, makes the Foucauldian point even stronger. Havel is not applying a theoretical model he has been taught. He is merely describing something that is real, that is there and in plain view. “The Power of the Powerless” is not an illustration of a theory. It is a picture of the world. It is, of course, a picture of a world that is no more, and which had its very special contexts. But it is still, in a very important sense, our world. What it is a picture of is much more than what it meant to disagree with communism. It is a picture of how power works, of politics, of language, and of how communality is formed, threatened and lost – and sometimes also regained.

The notion of a seeping kind of power comes into view immediately in the text and is integral to Havel’s understanding of the distinctive features of a post-totalitarian political system. In contrast to a more “traditional” dictatorship, based on “unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power”;² where power is clearly visible since it is based on a “small group of peo-

1 Havel, V. “The Power of the Powerless”. *East European Politics and Societies*, 32, 2018, No. 2, p. 353–408, doi:10.1177/0888325418766625; Cf. Falk, B. J., “The Power of the Powerless and Václav Havel’s ‘Responsibilityism’”. *East European Politics and Societies* 32, 2018, No. 2, p. 328–333, doi:10.1177/0888325417745130; Foucault, M., *On the Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–1973*, ed. B. E. Harcourt, trans. G. Burchell. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 228; Lukes, S. M., “Guilt-Tripping the Greengrocer”. *East European Politics and Societies* 32, 2018, No. 2, p. 294–300, doi:10.1177/0888325417745132.

2 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 356.

ple who take over the government of a given country by force”;³ and where the instruments of power are visible and direct; and the men in power are “easily distinguished socially from the majority over whom they rule”;⁴ the communist regime of post-war Czechoslovakia has a much more complex power structure. Thus, he calls it “post-totalitarian”. Power is not local, and there are a great number of people who can be held to be responsible. In fact, the responsibility of upholding the system is everyone’s, and it is everywhere. It is no one’s. It is nowhere. “[I]ndividuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system.”⁵

We easily associate political freedom with the freedom to act and to respond. Thus, the political notion of freedom, just like the predominant notion of morality, is locked into a scheme in which the defining poles are action and accountability. Someone does something. The others judge. But what happens to the notion of freedom if there is no acting subject, or if all subjects are responsible? Who should be blamed? Who praised? What is there to judge? What is the place, role and responsibility of the individual? What is the right inflection of the concept of responsibility here?

The answer to these questions is to be found among the onions and carrots:

The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: “Workers of the world, unite!” Why does he do it? What is he trying to communicate to the world? Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment’s thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?⁶

The example of the greengrocer is one that Havel returns to on several occasions throughout the essay. And this is not accidental. The centrality of Havel’s greengrocer, and the sign placed among the onions and carrots, is the exact image of how power is produced and the system upheld, and of the people of the post-totalitarian state, both responsible and innocent. I think it is fair to assume that we all understand that the greengrocer partakes in

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 361.

6 Ibid., p. 359. The famous slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” is obviously the famous closing sentence from *The Communist Manifesto*. See Marx, K. and Engels, F., *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. M. Milligan. Amherst, Prometheus 1988, p. 243.

spreading the ideology of the post-totalitarian government. It is equally clear that the greengrocer himself knows that, at least on some level, and that he does not agree with the message he conveys. So why does he do it?

Well, the first answer that may come to mind is that he does it out of fear, and there is probably something to that. But I think this is far too simplistic an answer to really help us. Later on in the essay, Havel expands the example and asks us to imagine “that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogans merely to ingratiate himself”.⁷ He also pictures the greengrocer as no longer partaking in sham elections and beginning to speak his mind at political meetings.⁸ As Havel notes, “The bill is not long in coming. He will be relieved of his post as manager of the shop and transferred to the warehouse. His pay will be reduced. His hopes for a holiday in Bulgaria will evaporate. His children’s access to higher education will be threatened. His superiors will harass him and his fellow workers will wonder about him.”⁹ So he would be punished. So he certainly has some very good reasons to fear retribution. But is that why he does not do it? Is the fear of retribution the *full* answer to the question of why he keeps the sign in his window?

No. That answer does not at all account for what we might call the automatism of the signposting. The idea that that the greengrocer puts up the sign merely out of fear (or lack of moral integrity) makes it look as if the problem is one of dictatorship (and not post-totalitarianism) – there is a limited group of people that demand that you countersign their message, and if you don’t, brute force will be knocking on your door. In a dictatorship, in contrast to a post-totalitarian government, the posting of the sign would have been forced, and the content of the message would have been crystal clear, not up for grabs. In a dictatorship, where force and the threat of violence is immanent at all times, it is given, a starting point, that the message is false, or not at all the shopkeeper’s. In a dictatorship, the greengrocer would put up *any* message, and the public would know that he has put up that sign in order to spare a finger, avoid a year in prison, save the lives of his children. He does it to avoid the infliction of pain. But in the case of Havel’s Czechoslovak greengrocer, the system depends on a rather strange form of countersignature. He does not put up a sign with a message he disagrees with in any obvious straightforward manner, and the people passing by don’t know what the shopkeeper’s thoughts about the sign are. There is no “Do this, or else...” But there is a “This is simply what we do.”

7 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, 367.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

I feel inclined to say that the differences between Havel's shopkeeper and my imagined dictatorship counterpart are blurred if we think of both of these scenarios as "a lie uttered, or posted, as a response to threat". The personal relationship to the words uttered, or posted, are far from on a par here. Thus, the structures of intentionality (and hence of responsibility) look different. So it is not a matter of truth vs. lie, or threat vs. non threat. It is a matter of *meaning it*. And I think we need to make these things clear in order to understand another fundamental distinction that Havel draws – between "living a lie" and "living in truth".¹⁰

My impression is that this distinction (between living a lie and living in truth) runs the risk of distorting Havel's actual point, for it makes it seem as if there is a simple fact of the matter (rulers lie) that can be combated by the really brave and strong (who expose the lie and tell the truth). And this makes it seem as if the presence of the communist regime was due to people being afraid to speak the truth. This is still too much phrased in the action/reaction model of the moral and political. Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, one might say that one misunderstands the distinction between living a lie and living in truth if one thinks about this as a question of truth vs. lie. It is not the meaning (itself) that is at stake; it is the *meaning it*.

So let us think a little bit more about our shopkeeper and try to see what "meaning it" is and is not, and how that can help us attain an understanding of "living a lie" and "living in truth" in a way that goes beyond the simplified notion of true/false that is so intimately intertwined with the action/responsibility model. We need to find ways to see how "meaning it" is tied more to "living" than to facts and semantic content. We need to find this, in order to really see how "power" cannot (at least not in this case) be reduced to intentional action, or to the mere use of an already established semantic content.

2. A matter of meaning it

So how do we cash out "meaning it" in relation to "living in truth" and "living a lie" if not in terms of lying by saying something with an established meaning while thinking (privately, secretly) that it is not true? Answering that question must go via finding the right kind of emphasis on the *living*. Words and sentences are not just things we say. They are lived, and not merely uttered. One aspect of how a phrase such as "Workers of the world, unite!" may be lived (and not just said) is that it is employed with a form of automatism. Speech and expression can be lived as being habitual. We might mean it "habitually" (as in contrast to, perhaps, "wholeheartedly"). For somebody well

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 367–369.

versed in Merleau-Ponty, one may say that this is the distinction between “utterance” and “expression”.¹¹ Our grocer is speaking, but is not expressing himself.

I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life “in harmony with society,” as they say.¹²

There is a delivery coming, and he puts all of the goods – the carrots, the onions, the sign from the bureau – in the window. Like he has always done. Like the owner of the neighboring store does. We may say that he does this thoughtlessly, but it doesn’t really make sense to think of the arrangement of the shop window as done either intentionally or *unintentionally*. (This is one example where philosophers sometimes go wrong believing that if an action was not done intentionally, it must have been done unintentionally – as if all terms must be understood as open to an “either/or”. The problem here is a diminished understanding of what performing an action is.¹³) The sign is just as familiar and everyday as onions and carrots are. Yes, there is a threat of being reproached if he doesn’t do it. But, as it is here portrayed, the reason why he does place the sign in his window it is not that he is forced to do it. I also think it would be wrong to say that “he does it because he wants to be in harmony with society”, because even that ascribes too much intentionality to the act. Rather, he does it because he *is* in harmony with society.

11 Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Prose of the World*, ed. C. Lefort, trans. J. O’Neill. Evanston, Northwestern University Press 1973. See especially Chapter 2.

12 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 359.

13 Stanley Cavell describes this erroneous conception well when he says, “The philosopher who asks about everything we do, ‘Voluntary or not?’ has a poor view of action (as the philosopher who asks of everything we say, ‘True or false?’ or ‘Analytic or synthetic?’ has a poor view of communication), in something like the way a man who asks the cook about every piece of food, ‘Was it cut or not?’ has a poor view of preparing food.” Cavell, S., “Must We Mean What We Say?” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1976, p. 36.

The difference between “wanting to be in harmony with society” and “being in harmony with society” can be spelled out as the difference between *conformism* and *communality*. “Conformism” suggests that he acts with the intention to fit in. “Communality” suggests that he does fit it. This is also one of the reasons why Havel has such strong reservations about the word “ideology”. In the post-totalitarian state, power does not work by forcing a culture’s inhabitants to countersign the doctrines of the system. They *are* the system.

Another way in which the employment of the phrase “Workers of the world, unite!” – as used by Havel’s grocer – is not an expression that is being countersigned by being used, comes into view if we try to unpack the various ways in which the sentence may be said to mean.

Obviously the greengrocer is indifferent to the semantic content of the slogan on exhibit; he does not put the slogan in his window from any personal desire to acquaint the public with the ideal it expresses. This, of course, does not mean that his action has no motive or significance at all, or that the slogan communicates nothing to anyone. The slogan is really a *sign*, and as such it contains a subliminal but very definite message. Verbally, it might be expressed this way: “I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace.” This message, of course, has an addressee: it is directed above, to the greengrocer’s superior, and at the same time it is a shield that protects the greengrocer from potential informers. The slogan’s real meaning, therefore, is rooted firmly in the greengrocer’s existence. It reflects his vital interests. But what are those vital interests?¹⁴

Here, Havel claims that the grocer says he is *indifferent* to the semantic content of the poster. I don’t think that this is the best way to spell out the grocer’s relation to what we may call (though not without some hesitation) “the semantic content” of the sign, and, as we will see in a little while, Havel himself will help us see why this formulation is too simplistic.¹⁵

What “indifference” is supposed to mean in this passage is that the grocer does not have a “personal desire to acquaint the public with the ideal it

14 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 359.

15 This means that it is too simplistic to say that Havel’s talk about living in truth can be summarised as “Responsibility innately involves a rejection of what is ideologically prescribed or proscribed.” Falk, B. J., “The Power of the Powerless and Václav Havel’s ‘Responsibilityism’”, p. 329.

expresses". And that is probably true. The grocer does not think that he has a message, that he has countersigned, that he wants to inform the people passing by about. But, in what sense does that explicate, or even describe, what "the semantic content" of the slogan is? Put otherwise, one does not necessarily have to *disagree* with the thought that workers, or all proletarians, of the world should unite, in order to hesitate to be uncomfortable about displaying the power's poster. In fact, I want to suggest that it is precisely the semantic content of the slogan that makes it bearable for the grocer to post it without much thought or much hesitation. It is precisely the semantic content that makes it possible for the grocer to *live* the lie. I mean, why shouldn't all the workers of the world, who are exploited by a ruthless capitalist logic, join forces?

As we follow this paragraph through, Havel makes a distinction by spelling out something like the "connotative logic" of "Workers of the logic, unite!"

First, we have the sentence itself, the slogan.

"Workers of the world, unite!"

But then he goes on to say that "as such it contains a subliminal but very definite message", namely:

"I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace."

What we need to really take note of here is the "as such" in the phrase "*as such* it contains a subliminal but very definite message". The "as such" places the phrase in a very special context – the context of the post-totalitarian regime.

Thus, there is in fact a double countersignature here. On the one hand, the grocer can countersign what we may call "the semantic content", that is, the idea that people in need, or people who are being used, people whose work primarily feeds someone else's pockets, should join forces. On the other hand, being a grocer in a post-totalitarian regime *means* being someone whose belonging to a community depends on partaking in the charade. But partaking in the charade does not mean endorsing it. If there is an intentional level here, it is that of not wanting to be shouldered out, of wanting to be left in peace, of actually being a man who sells onions and carrots, of actually being a greengrocer.¹⁶

16 This means that I think Falk is right to stress that Havel claims that the greengrocer is "indifferent to the semantic content of the slogan" (*ibid.*) but wrong to conclude that "the ideological

But, what are we now to make of the idea of his living a lie? I mean, if there is a dual, though not necessarily intentional, countersignature, where is the deception?

Let us take note: if the greengrocer had been instructed to display the slogan “I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient”; he would not be nearly as indifferent to its semantics, even though the statement would reflect the truth. The greengrocer would be embarrassed and ashamed to put such an unequivocal statement of his own degradation in the shop window, and quite naturally so, for he is a human being and thus has a sense of his own dignity.¹⁷

Thus, the first answer to the question about where the deception lies is to be found precisely in what we may call “the semantic content”. Havel continues:

To overcome this complication, his expression of loyalty must take the form of a sign which, at least on its textual surface, indicates a level of disinterested conviction. It must allow the greengrocer to say, “What’s wrong with the workers of the world uniting?” Thus the sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the façade of something high. And that something is ideology.¹⁸

I want to call this “the pressure of the literal” meaning to suggest that the idea of a literal meaning sometimes pushes us into confusion.¹⁹ Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with workers of the world uniting, and one does not need to be a radical leftist to think so. It is precisely because of the fact that this is a thought one might very well countersign that the ideological commitments are obscured from view. The way in which our grocer is living a lie is that he has handed over the responsibility to mean to language itself. He is, as it were, hiding behind the benign “literal” meaning of the phrase. The words are, one may say, mentioned but not lived. The lie is precisely rooted in the living, and not in the lie. The lie comes about because

nature of the slogan helps to conceal his obsequiousness. Ideology helps negate any sense of personal responsibility.” *Ibid.* As I understand it, it is precisely the idea of “semantic content” that makes it possible for the greengrocer to avoid feeling engaged in an ideological connotative logic.

17 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 359.

18 *Ibid.*

19 This thought is further developed and discussed in Forsberg, N. *Lectures on a Philosophy Less Ordinary: Language and Morality in J. L. Austin’s Philosophy*. New York: Routledge 2022.

one *can* trust language to carry enough meaning on its own, and one does not have to own one's utterances, to live in and through them. And he can do that because we *must* be able to do so. The emphasis on language as lived, or on the importance of expression over utterance (to echo Merleau-Ponty), does not mean that language is not an inheritance, and that the meanings handed down to us can be circumvented.

Let me take a banal example, even though I know that the parallel line of thought is not an analogy. Think of it as an object of comparison, aiming to shed light on how the idea of literal meaning may seem as obvious to us as formal forms of reasoning. Suppose I say, as I have been told, that SJ (a company formerly known as Swedish Rail, but now privatised) actually did state, in trying to attend to public relations, that "A cancelled train is not a train running late." This comment was made as a sort of response to the accusation that SJ was not honest in their statistics of how many trains were on time and how many arrived too late. In order to make the numbers look better, they came up with the rule that if a train had not started its journey by X number of minutes after its scheduled departure, it was to be cancelled altogether. And, as it turns out, there were quite a few trains that were cancelled. But the statistics started to look much better! Trains were on time – the few that were running, that is.

Clearly, there is a form of belief that literal meaning functions as forming an excuse of sorts here. This is what these words mean! Literal sense, literal sentence-meaning, may be felt as a force in itself that exercises formal pressure on us and our thinking. For it may seem tempting to say, "Yes, of course, in one sense you are right – a cancelled train is not the same as a train that is running late." The expectation of a literal meaning may indeed seem as pervasive as formal syllogisms do: "Yes of course, if all women are mortal, and if Xantippa is a woman, then Xantippa is mortal."

But what happened here, and what we must learn to pierce through, is that one power source in our house of being (in this case, SJ) has rejected its own responsibility to mean – denied its own linguistic vulnerability, if you wish – and handed over the responsibility to mean (I am inclined to say "tried to hand over", thus meaning to imply that deep down they did not succeed) to language itself, to a meaning-structure external to all human endeavours (doings, wantings, desires, wishes, hopes, etc.) that supposedly guides and controls these activities.

Of course, it is reasonable to assume that even the good people at SJ suspected that their audience would look at their literal excuses as unfair twists and turns of a shared language. But it is nevertheless true that the PR people of SJ also assumed that deep down, undoubtedly unconsciously, most people do think that literal sense is original sense. To rely on literal sense is also

a way to refrain from taking responsibility for one's words, one's wordings, one's effort to be part of a community. But we should not go so far as to say that there is no sense at all to the idea of literal sentence meaning. We feel the pressure of it quite often. Thousands of jokes (and bad puns in conversations) depend on our recognising that.

But the pressure of the literal is a strong one. And it must be. Imagine, for example, that someone attempted to sue Swedish Rail/SJ for not providing a refund because he or she did not reach their desired destination in time. But if it says in the fine print of the travel documents, which the poor passenger agreed to when he or she made the purchase, that he or she will get a refund if the train was delayed by more than X minutes but says nothing about trains that are cancelled, this would be an open-and-shut case.

I take it, however, that most of us would say that SJ is still to be held responsible, and that no reputable company should treat its customers that way. That is, we would say that they are morally wrong. What we cannot say is that they broke the law. And that is, in its own way, perhaps frustrating. But that is what moral life often is like. We *want* something outside us, something external, to rely on when we fall short. In one sense (and I really mean *one* sense, so I do not mean this to be exhaustive, though I do think this sense is very important) morality *is* exactly an effect of our being caught between inherited sense (the sense handed down to us, the lexical "definitions", the "law of language", if you wish), on the one hand, and the fluctuating, muddled, tangible, stretches and twists and turns that our lived language harbours, on the other.

3. On truth, lie and non-political politics

This description of morality as existing in a field of tension between inherited sense and new projections can help us see the transition Havel's grocer undergoes when he moves from "living a lie" to "living in truth". It is not a matter of negating a false statement or utterance, and replacing it with a true one. It is a matter of realising that the responsibility for meaning is, ultimately, ours, and that the way in which he, the grocer, is one of us also is something that has to be earned. This is, so far as I can see, one of the most important effects of Stanley Cavell's recognition that "Grammar cannot, or ought not, of itself dictate what you mean, what it is up to you to say."²⁰ It would be mistaken to think that this means that linguistic sense is a free-floating subjective matter. It obviously is not, and thinking about this in terms of our existing in a field

20 Cavell, S., "The Politics of Interpretation (Politics as Opposed to What?)" in *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes*. San Francisco, North Point Press 1984, p. 45.

of tension between inherited sense and new projections helps us see why. The point is rather that inherited sense can always be altered (but not on a whim), and that we are just as responsible for the effects of our words as we are for their “literal” meaning. The “lie” in question here is thus not a matter of expressing false belief but of shunning the consequences, of pretending that there are no effects and causes of words put to work.

Thus, “living a lie” is a matter of the grocer’s externalising sense: since “Workers of the world, unite!” just means “Workers of the world, unite!” no harm can be done in posting it. And realising that something might be wrong here is not to realise that it was, after all, false that the oppressed might do well to join forces. “Living in truth” does not mean rejecting the slogan, and replacing it with another, but rather starting to move away from a reliance on inherited sense and taking responsibility for the effects of one’s utterances. The recognition of this point also serves to lessen the appeal of the accusation that Havel is judgemental, that he is “morally wrong in that he blames the most vulnerable”.²¹ Thinking that Havel blames the morally weak is a thought that is rooted in the idea that the citizen of a post-totalitarian regime is a person who endorses a view that he or she *knows* to be false, but endorses it nevertheless out of fear of retribution or lack of moral standing. But this is not the case here. Havel is describing how we “support” the system by saying something that is harmless, or maybe even true, with no other intention than to actually be a greengrocer. What Havel shows is that subordination to the system is not a matter of supporting falsehoods that one wouldn’t support if one was brave enough. Havel’s image of how individuals “are the system”²² is not the image of weak people who would speak up if they only had the courage, or would speak the truth if they had the financial and moral resources to do so; it is the image of a system that feeds on the fact that we all belong to a linguistic community, where the possibility of handing over the meaning of our words to language itself is always present.

To make this schematic:

“Living a lie” *means* handing over the responsibility to mean to language as a system of established meanings. This is what sustains ideology.²³

“Living in truth” *means* making language one’s own, making it owned. Taking responsibility for what one means to say. This is a moral effort.

21 Ost, D., “The Sham, and the Damage, of ‘Living in Truth’”. *East European Politics and Societies*, 32, 2018, No. 2, p. 302, doi:10.1177/0888325417747971.

22 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 361.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 359.

This way of understanding the movement from living a lie to living in truth also helps us see that the core thought of the whole movement of Charter 77, and indeed what motivates the use of quotation marks around the word “dissident”. One “ideology” is not to be replaced by another. One thought is not to be replaced with another. Or, to put it somewhat provocatively, the point is to see that “Workers of the world, unite!” should be replaced with “Workers of the world, unite!” The sense must be transformed to truly be inherited. External decree should not be replaced with an external decree.

A genuine, profound, and lasting change for the better (...) can no longer result from the victory (were such a victory possible) of any particular traditional political conception, which can ultimately be only external, that is, a structural or systemic conception. More than ever before, such a change will have to derive from human existence, from the fundamental reconstitution of the position of people in the world, their relationships to themselves and to each other, and to the universe. If a better economic and political model is to be created, then perhaps more than ever before it must derive from profound existential and moral changes in society. This is not something that can be designed and introduced like a new car. If it is to be more than just a new variation of the old degeneration, it must above all be an expression of life in the process of transforming itself.²⁴

It is because the change required – required because the form of the power structure they are dissenting from is seeping, no one’s and everyone’s – is a transformation from externalised to lived, from political to moral *in contrast to* and from false to true; it is because “real political force is due exclusively to its pre-political context”,²⁵ that Charter 77 “offers no new conception, model or ideology”.²⁶

Ideology is an effort to transmit a determinate content, to dictate what the central doctrines are (although this certainly can be done in manifold ways, some slightly less explicit than others). In traditional politics, ideologies are in conflict. But these conflicts are apparent, visible to everyone. Two opposing thoughts stand against one another. What Havel has seen, though, is that at a very important level, “the political” (understood as competing options, different ideologies) is something that is secondary to a more fundamental level: living. The existential aspect of Havel’s non-political politics

24 Ibid., p. 376ff.

25 Ibid., p. 386.

26 Ibid., p. 387.

can thus be described as the effort to earn one's language, which is not something one achieves by simply endorsing or rejecting a doctrine or an ideology; that kind of countersignature is derivative, and if one does not see that it is so, it is a lie. Given that this "sphere" is non-doctrinal, indeed in opposition to the very idea of doctrines, it remains *hidden* to the political eye. But it is in this hidden sphere "that life lived openly in the truth grows; it is to this sphere that it speaks, and in it that it finds understanding. This is where the potential for communication exists. But this place is hidden and therefore, from the perspective of power, very dangerous."²⁷

There is good reason, then, to think that one of Havel's main complaints against ideology, as well as the hope for a non-political politics, is rooted in a recognition that locked, doctrinal sense is precisely that which blocks true philosophical reflection and makes it impossible for us to own our own language, thereby handing over the effort to mean to doctrines (that are countersigned but never one's own). On this particular point, one can see that Havel and Ladislav Hejduk (who also has some reservations about Havel's position²⁸) were both gesturing towards the same thought:

Not a group, nor an organisation, not society, nor even the state, is capable of reflection, because they do not have the ability to open themselves with authentic openness of language, of the world and of truth. As the products of man, they are capable of only a type of distancing, that is, of alienation; they are capable of emancipating themselves from human management in order to position themselves against man and eventually to sweep even him to alienation.²⁹

If the core of ideology is the transmission of one determinate message – to be implemented by force or without – the effort of non-political politics is to show that ideology begins in a faulty conception of language, and that fundamental formations of political life begin, not in doctrine, but in life.³⁰

27 *Ibid.*, p. 369.

28 See Tomáš Hejduk's "What form of existentialism is there in Havel's concept of dissent?: Hejduk's critique of Havel" in this issue.

29 Ladislav Hejduk, "Reflexe v Politice a Otázka Politického Subjektu," *Filosofický Casopis* 6 (1990): 746–61 The passage is translated by Tomáš Hejduk.

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