

On the death of Václav Havel

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21 December 2011

The death of Václav Havel on Sunday has triggered a flood of positive obituaries. Throughout the international media, this former opponent of the Stalinist regime who became Czech president is being celebrated as “a statesman of historic significance,” “a great European” and “a fighter for human rights and democracy.”

Many in the Czech Republic and Eastern Europe would see this somewhat differently. Havel was the kind of democrat who above all saw Stalinism as an obstacle to their own social advance, because they were denied the social status, wealth and prominence enjoyed by sections of the upper middle class in the West. He was largely oblivious to the fate of working people.

Václav Havel was born on 5 October 1936 in an influential upper-class family in Prague. In the interwar period, his grandfather, father and uncle were involved in the construction of several buildings in Prague and the founding of the famous Barrandov Film Studios, acquiring a considerable fortune. After the Communist Party took power in 1948, they were dispossessed.

The Stalinist regime prevented Václav from attending high school because he came from a bourgeois family. He continued his education at night school, worked in a chemistry lab and as a taxi driver, beginning a business degree, which he later broke off. He entered the theatre as a stage technician and he began to present his own plays in the 1960s.

Havel’s plays were in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd, which shares much with existential philosophy. They criticized the absurd aspects of the Stalinist power structures, and contributed to the cultural atmosphere of the 1968 Prague Spring.

After the Prague Spring suppression by troops of the Warsaw Pact, Havel’s plays were banned in Czechoslovakia. He spent five years in prison for his opposition to the regime.

In 1977, Havel was among the initiators of Charter 77, which condemned the restriction and suppression of civil rights and the subordination of state institutions to the Communist Party. The only demand made by Charter 77 was compliance with treaties the Czechoslovak regime had signed, especially the Final Act of the CSCE Conference in Helsinki. The Charter has been published by leading Western newspapers and is considered the founding document of the civil rights movement in Czechoslovakia.

Havel always stressed he was not a dissident, because he had not “deviated” from Stalinism but had always been its opponent. He not only rejected Stalinism but any form of socialist perspective, and even the Enlightenment’s belief in progress.

The core theme of his plays and writings was the alienation of man from his “*Lebenswelt*” or the “natural world”—a term he borrowed, via the Czech philosopher Vaclav Belohradsky, from the phenomenology of German philosopher Edmund Husserl. He looked for the cause of this alienation in science, which in enlightened society had taken on the status of the highest authority, something previously reserved for a higher unknown (God).

“The natural world, in virtue of its very being, bears within it the presupposition of the absolute which grounds, delimits, animates and directs it, without which it would be unthinkable, absurd, and superfluous, and which we can only quietly respect,” Havel wrote in a 1984 essay *Politics and Conscience*. “Any attempt to spurn it, master it, or replace it with something else, appears, within the framework of the natural world, as in expression of hubris for which humans must pay a heavy price, as did Don Juan and Faust.”

Havel considered the most extreme form of alienation from the living world to be the Stalinist dictatorships. Rulers and leaders who were once personalities in their own right, “have been replaced in modern times by the manager, the bureaucrat, the professional apparatchik - a professional ruler, manipulator, and expert in the techniques of management, manipulation, and obfuscation, filling a depersonalized intersection of functional relations, a cog in the machinery of state caught up in a predetermined role.”

Finally, Havel writes in the same essay, this alienation is inherent to the whole of modern civilization: “To be sure, this process by which power becomes anonymous and depersonalized, and reduced to a mere technology of rule and manipulation, has a thousand masks, variants, and expressions. In one case it is covert and inconspicuous, while in another case it is entirely overt; in one case it sneaks up on us along subtle and devious paths, in another case it is brutally direct. Essentially, though, it is the same universal trend. It is the essential trait of all modern civilization ...”

Again and again he comes back to this point: “No error could be greater than the one looming largest: that of a failure to

understand the totalitarian systems for what they ultimately are—a convex mirror of all modern civilization and a harsh, perhaps final call for a global recasting of how that civilization understands itself.”

From this, Havel concludes there is “one fundamental task from which all else should follow.” He explains, “That task is one of resisting vigilantly, thoughtfully, and attentively but, at the same time with total dedication, at every step and everywhere, the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power—the power of ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans. We must resist its complex and wholly alienating pressure, whether it takes the form of consumption, advertising, repression, technology, or cliché—all of which are the blood brothers of fanaticism and the wellspring of totalitarian thought. We must draw our standards from our natural world, heedless of ridicule, and reaffirm its denied validity. We must honour with the humility of the wise the limits of that natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence.”

This backward-looking, irrational, and, in the literal sense of the word, reactionary ideology made Havel the ideal instrument for the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe in 1989. He was one of the spokesmen of the so-called “velvet revolution” in Prague, in the course of which the Stalinist rulers negotiated the gradual peaceful transition of power with Havel’s Civic Forum.

This had less to do with the introduction of democracy, as with the dividing up of state property under a new class of capitalist owners, recruited from both the old Stalinist bureaucracy and the emerging “democrats.” The two camps agreed upon the political and legal mechanisms by which the former state-owned property was transferred into private ownership.

The intervention of broader social layers was not desirable, since the social gains of the working class were bound up with state-owned property and fell victim to the restoration of capitalism.

On December 29, 1989, as a representative of the Civic Forum, Havel was elected president by the Stalinist-dominated Federal Assembly. Six months later, he was confirmed in office by the now newly-elected parliament. His chief of staff was Karel Schwarzenberg, the scion of a centuries-old millionaire aristocratic family from Bohemia, and currently the Czech foreign minister.

Havel presided over the destruction of the education, health and pension systems, and the introduction of the “Wild West” capitalism that continues to shape the Czech Republic, Eastern Europe and Russia to this day. For workers and pensioners the political changes of 1989 have produced a social catastrophe. Havel, however, benefited from them; the return of the family assets expropriated in 1948 made him and his brother Ivan

millionaires.

The wave of privatizations sparked violent clashes over the spoils between different wings of the ruling class, eventually leading to the division of the country. In 1992, Havel temporarily lost his office as a result, but after the secession of Slovakia Havel was elected President of the Czech Republic, a post he held for ten years.

Havel tried to stand above the party bickering through his eccentric political style, combining feudal pomp with elements of his theatre of the absurd. He celebrated the presidency at the medieval Prague Castle with fanfares, pomp, and other rituals, and asked his friend, director Milos Forman, to send a costume designer from Hollywood to outfit the grey-clad palace guard in new colourful uniforms.

The musician Frank Zappa and the Rolling Stones were also regular guests at Prague Castle. Their rock music was popular in Prague opposition circles in the 1960s. The Rolling Stones returned the favour, donating a new lighting system for the presidential palace.

Despite his eccentricities, Havel pursued an extremely right-wing political course. He integrated the Czech Republic as quickly as possible into the largest military alliance in the world and supported the wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Havel refused to hold a referendum on the controversial issue of NATO membership, on the grounds that this would challenge the mandate of the democratically-elected representatives of the state and express mistrust towards the state. One of his last official acts was in 2003, with the Czech Republic’s inclusion in the “coalition of the willing,” although the government and the majority of Czech citizens opposed the Iraq war.

Havel’s anti-communism, his arrogance towards working people and his unconditional support for the wars of NATO and the US made him the darling of international politics and the media. His chest was not big enough for all the medals and decorations showered upon him. He was awarded the 1989 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, in 1991 the Charlemagne Prize, and in 2003, from the hands of George W. Bush, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times.



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