



Understanding Havel?



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ABSTRACT

The presented article tries to make sense of Václav Havel, a man of many qualities and professions yet not a professional in the conventional sense of the word. The aim is to offer deeper insight into diverse cognitive elements which formed Havel's political reasoning and attitudes. The idea is to provide an alternative interpretation and get beyond the customary explanations expressed through traditional IR language seeing Havel as a dissident idealist who was pushed by some realist impulses to clearly define real political and later also geopolitical stands. In doing so, the article is divided into three parts. The first part discusses conceptual frameworks (rather than a single framework) within which Havel saw and understood the political world. The middle part examines Havel's political agenda, namely the issues of the return to Europe, the German question, and relationships with Russia, the United States and toward multilateral institutions. The final part that utilizes primary data obtained through personal interviews with many Havel's close collaborators presents two faces of Václav Havel: the dramatist and the ideologue.

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1. Introduction

Václav Havel was an extraordinary man. He may not have been an original thinker. In words of Hejdanek (2009), a Czech philosopher active in the dissent during Communist times and a friend, while he possessed a talent for critical inquiry, he never was *captivated* by the subject of his analysis; never taking the pain to laboriously think it through. If he could be likened to a chemical element, it would be carbon, with its remarkable quality to coalesce with other elements in seemingly endless combinations, thus opening ever-new possibilities. This fitting metaphor involves both Havel's ability to absorb ideas from diverse sources as well as connect and often unite different personalities, ranging from conservative catholic philosophers to bohemian underground musicians in the dissent or diverse representatives in the realm of high politics. What made him stand out among contemporary statesmen was the resolve and intellectual capacity to examine the underlying problems of human condition from a truly cosmopolitan perspective.

His role in tearing down the Communist empire is rarely challenged. Indeed, the narrative of his life has been turned into something of a myth: a story of a playwright who mocked the authoritarian system in his absurd dramas but also stood up against it, refusing to play the role assigned to him by the system, was imprisoned several times and finally, in a momentous turn of history, led a peaceful, "velvet," revolution that brought it down and became his country's first democratic president. Yet, though merely a president of a small Central European parliamentary republic that struggled to return to its democratic tradition, reform its economy and reunite with the rest of the continent through integration to NATO and the EU, Havel became also a relevant actor in the world politics of the 1990s and 2000s.

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The aim of this article is to offer deeper insight into diverse cognitive elements which formed Havel's political reasoning and attitudes. The idea is to get beyond the customary explanations expressed through traditional IR language seeing Havel as dissident idealist who was pushed by some realist impulses to clearly define real political, and later also geopolitical stands. Institutional or functionalist approaches, as the narrative goes, provided a proverbial bridge between the two perspectives. Instead of trying to squeeze Havel's political inclinations in the realm of foreign and international politics into conventional disciplinary categories, the following lines will first inquire into broader intellectual frame that shaped his political beliefs. Indeed, Havel's practical policies should be seen as closely linked to his more abstract philosophemes (Tucker, 2000). Investigation of these linkages makes it possible to go beyond stereotypical understanding of his role.

While taking this perspective the analysis will more specifically elucidate the dialectical evolutionary shift between his concept of *antipolitical politics* (Havel, 1986) and the concept of *cultural geopolitics*, which informed his understanding of "real" politics in the post-dissident times. While the *antipolitical politics* translated into a more standard political language provided the background for Havel's position at the forefront of several initiatives supporting the human rights or environmental responsibility, the *cultural geopolitics* informed his attitudes toward major events of international affairs of his presidential times. That said the article intends to show that capturing this counter-intuitive tension constitutes a crucial step in portraying Havel's political mindset.

To achieve this goal the first part of the article will introduce crucial concepts of Havel's reasoning grounded in abstract philosophemes. Building on this understanding the discussion will approximate these ideas to a theoretical discussion linking the unconventional concepts with the liberal paradigm usually associated with Havel's thinking and political practice. Following this reflection, the article will illustrate the previous debate on several concrete political agendas, which accompanied Havel's presidential period. Finally, the article will return to unconventional frameworks introducing different political facets depicting Havel's extraordinary relation to America, his specific understanding of ideology, and his theatrical nature apparently permeating his political actions.

2. Conceptual frameworks

2.1. Havel's 'lay political philosophy'

Václav Havel came from a distinguished family, which he, staying on top of things, did not hesitate to call grand bourgeoisie recalling one of the historical pillars of the Communist propaganda. Although his legacy has naturally exceeded the deeds of his ancestors, several modernist buildings constructed by his father and grandfather still serve as tangible examples of Havel's family contribution to the Czech social and cultural milieu of the late 19th and first half of 20th century. In the best sense of the grand bourgeois tradition Havel in his early years experienced a rich environment of the Czech social, political as well as art elite and, indeed, never left these circles even if they lost prominence and were pushed to the society's margins after the Communist putsch (Kusin, 2002; Bolton, 2012).

Some of the potential formative elements of Havel's thinking are clearly fascinating. It is even more so since he, indeed like carbon, managed to creatively connect diverging ideas but, remarkably, also diverse personalities. The creative richness of Havel's origins can be symbolized by his grandfather Václav's interest in spiritualism and occultism that went beyond the then vogue, as Václav under a pseudonym wrote a volume called *Book of Life*, where he discussed issues on the borderline of science, religion, and philosophy (Havel, 2011a, b). Clearly, Václav Havel did not surrender to occultism but he definitely shared his grandfather's endeavor to surmount the positivist science and formulate a new conception on firm metaphysical foundations (Putna, 2011, 2009, 61–97; Havel, 2001, 1990a). Although Havel's dissident experience was crucial and substantially formed his political reasoning, he also followed the tradition of the Czech democratic state that was heavily influenced by the first Czechoslovak president Tomas Garrigue Masaryk.

Although Masaryk's project must be seen as remarkable political achievement, his perception of his own politics was deeply apolitical. The crucial dimensions of politics were in his eyes cultural and moral. In this sense creative politics has a higher mission to bring harmony to contentious and discordant realms of social life (Masaryk, 2005 (1925)). While Václav Havel's grandfather Václav contemplated about religion, philosophy, and science, his father Václav M. Havel was a keen supporter of Masaryk and active carrying member of the newly developing Czech democratic civil society. Although Václav Havel remembered his early years' aversion to Masaryk's moral appeals, in the end these two leading political figures of the Czech democratic state share many similarities. Most visibly, they both were intellectuals (before taking the office Masaryk was a university professor of philosophy) but their affinities go rather deeper. More importantly, Havel apparently shared Masaryk's vision of the democratic state built on the ethical foundations provided by religion. Interestingly, though, both Masaryk's and Havel's personal spiritualities remain almost mysteriously unclear (Masaryk, 2000 (1896); Putna, 2009).

Hence, Havel's idea of spiritual state implicitly follows the idea of the Czech democratic state as formulated by Masaryk (Musil, 1995; Stritecky, 1995) but at the same time should be seen against the background of his strong, though not systematic, philosophical beliefs. Following his grandfather's intellectual interests and being inspired by several dissident philosophers Václav Havel often contemplated about the estrangement from natural world driven by the modern times rationalist science that understood this world only as a *prison of prejudices* (Havel, 1984). For Havel, rationalist science haughtily relativized the moral foundations of the societies through pursuing a myth of objectivism. His critique of modernization processes was not absolute. Rather, when expressing his critical reflection of "scientific" intrusions into society, he underlined the lack of respect

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