



## Havel's Democracy

by April Carter

Vaclav Havel is best known as a dramatist, as a founding member of Charter 77 and as the President of the Czech Republic. His plays, which have all been translated into English, are an important source for his political ideas. The early plays expose the absurd elements in the communist party regime. *The Memorandum*, for example, which centres on the introduction of an invented bureaucratic language, exposes hilariously the political and ideological manoeuvres to secure power and avoid disgrace in the rituals of party life, and comments on the nature of authentic language as opposed to dehumanized jargon. Several later plays draw directly on Havel's personal experience as a well known intellectual dissident and explore some of the ambiguities and pressures of this position. He is also widely admired for his essays and speeches, which combine original reflections on the problems of contemporary society with a vivid and concrete style of presenting his ideas.

His most famous essay is 'The Power of the Powerless', written in 1978, in which he developed the concept of 'post-totalitarianism' to explain the nature of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in that period, and used the graphic example of a green grocer who supports the ruling ideology by unreflectingly putting in his window the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite'. The essay is also a key source for understanding Havel's belief in the potential of the individual who 'lives in truth' and challenges a regime built on lies, whether he does so by commitment to personal responsibility in the workplace, adherence to genuine artistic creativity, or by open resistance to

injustice. It was very influential among intellectuals in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, who were engaged in mutual debate and opposition to the existing power structures. Solidarity activist Zbigniew Bujak has commented that the essay inspired them in 1979, when he and fellow activists in the factories had begun to despair. 'Reading it gave us the theoretical underpinning for our activity. It maintained our spirits... When I look at the victories of Solidarity, and of Charter 77, I see in them an astonishing fulfilment of the prophecies and knowledge contained in Havel's essay.'

Havel draws on the philosophy of Heidegger in many of his essays, and the concluding section of *Letters to Olga*, sent from prison, forms a protracted meditation on the individual's role in the world, often quoting from Heidegger. Determining the importance of his philosophical framework for his social and political thought is the main problem in interpreting Havel. One difficulty is that Havel does not consider himself a trained philosopher and does not feel constrained to use philosophical terms with academic rigour. The more central problem is that Havel's strong sense of personal moral responsibility, and commitment to human rights and to democracy, are in striking contrast to Heidegger's much debated accommodation with Nazism in the 1930s and failure to re-evaluate that stance in the period after 1945. Whereas Habermas, shocked by the re-publication of a 1935 lecture by Heidegger in 1953 without any explanation, detected a link between Heidegger's philosophy and his susceptibility to National Socialist ideas, Havel does not appear troubled by this question.

In Havel's case his life and ideas are very closely linked. The nearest he comes to purely abstract speculation is in his letters from prison, and his style in these letters was influenced by censorship. His thinking about democracy should be understood in the context of a continuous core to his thought: a profound

belief in the importance of individuals assuming the responsibilities of true citizenship; a commitment to the importance of an autonomous civil society; and a strong sense of the necessary linkage between culture and politics. The idea of a true democracy is also the antithesis to the spiritual and social alienation of contemporary technological, mass society.

His specific interpretation of what is entailed in democracy can, however, be divided into three stages of his life: his early views expressed at the time of the Prague Spring, when he stressed the need for an opposition party; the concept of democracy as 'anti-political politics' (when he expressed distrust of party politics) developed during the long years in opposition; and the partial revision of this 'anti-political' stance after 1990 in the context of the realities of creating liberal democratic institutions and exercising power. His second theory of democracy, which links up with the ideas of other East European intellectuals in opposition in the 1980s, and which seeks an alternative to 'actually existing' Western liberal democracy, is the most interesting. But it is arguable that Havel's third position indicates that the utopian character of the second renders it wholly unrealistic.

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