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The Truth on Living in Truth

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Abstract. This article delineates a significant problem with Vaclav Havel's analysis of the power of the powerless through living in truth.

Vaclav Havel's essay on the power of the powerless is often viewed as a guide on of political democracy in contemporary Czechoslovak history and in the contemporary history of eastern and central Europe. It was written largely to help support an understanding of the Charter 77 petition (January 1977) that advocated for civic and human rights in Czechoslovakia and throughout the world. In Havel's essay, he argued that those individuals thought to be powerful through their formal political sinecures and control of security and law enforcement actually were powerless in some very significant ways. The powerful could not manage every movement of those who were to be ruled. The powerful gradually lost power through political rituals and pro forma activities that drew them farther and farther away from some sense of being bound to anything but the most empty sense of reality. The powerful could not control natural instincts in the ruled for freedom, truth, dignity, and being human. The powerful could not control natural instincts in at least some of the ruled for contemplation of their noxious predicament and means to change it. Finally, the powerful would become ensnared within the very nature of systemic coercion that would render everyone both a potential supporter and opponent of the ruled in specific situations.

Through these examples of powerlessness of the powerful, the power of the powerless can be nurtured. The essential vehicle is to live in truth, which is largely an existential vehicle to power. Living in truth is focused on believing that there are some things worth suffering for--even if acting on this belief may elicit noxious consequences at the hands of the powerful. This is because acting on this belief may also modify the relationship between the powerful and the powerless to help shape a more benign reality. Again, the existential core is crucial. According to Havel, it is comprised of openness, truth, love, a sense of solidarity and responsibility with others. When an individual decides to live in this manner, the power of the powerful dissipates.

The problem lies in the denotation of the exemplars of living in truth--i.e., the requisite intrapsychic and behavioral phenomena. These phenomena are necessarily viewed in the eyes of the beholder. Much as one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, one person living in truth might be another person's asocial, antisocial, sociopathic, or psychopathic narcissist. Unfortunately, the typical response of the powerful that those who believe that they are living in truth might be characterized with the latter attributes has some kernel of truth. Meanwhile, an alternative to living in truth might embrace just the intrapsychic, but not the behavioral. The premise might be that the ruled could not affect the intrapsychic, thereby leaving a field of freedom to the powerless. However, social and clinical psychological research clearly suggest that the ruled can affect the intrapsychic. And even if this were not the case, one might be left in a solipsistic world bordering on the psychotic.

While Havel's essay may fail prescriptively, it succeeds majestically as an exhortation for perseverance in very grim times. While it fails as a primer for victory, it succeeds as a clarion call to ward off hopelessness. And while it fails as a blueprint to overthrow a noxious order, it succeeds as a projective

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text that can serve the deepest needs of people throughout the world. Even if one does not believe in truth, one may live in truth beyond, above, underneath, and through the Truths of fascism, communism, and other totalitarian control mechanisms. (See Havel, V. (1986). The power of the powerless. In J. Vladislav (Ed.). Living in truth (pp. 3-35). Faber and Faber; McGowan, T. (1999). The master amid rumors of his demise: Politics in a time of "satisfaction." *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 4, 72-80; Schock, K. (1999). People power and political opportunities: Social movement mobilization and outcomes in the Philippines and Burma. *Social Problems*, 46, 355-375; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (1997). Wife abuse: A method of social control. *Israel Social Science Research*, 12, 59-72; Winter, D.G. (2000). Power, sex, and violence: A psychological reconstruction of the 20th century and an intellectual agenda for political psychology. *Political Psychology*, 21, 383-404.) (Keywords: Havel, Power.)