

Living in truth in a time of ecological ‘emergency’ and emergence: Vaclav Havel as eco-guru

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This article argues that Vaclav Havel’s critique of technophilia has a lot to teach us about our collective response to the climate and ecological more-than-emergency. Havel highlights how consumer society endlessly tempts us to live within the lie that ‘everything is going to be okay’. His critique helps reveal the illusions that we need to shed in order to live in truth today. These illusions currently bind together too many ‘greens’ with the so-called ‘progressive’ element of the ruling class. Instead, the article argues that if we are being honest with ourselves, then the only way we can avoid collapse is by creating an ecological civilization by way of transformative adaptation.

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In the profound grip of the ecological crisis, it is easy to feel stuck: in the newness of it, in aloneness with it, in the implacable extremity of it. In that condition, we need thought-allies. Figures – gurus even – who help us to understand that what is happening is not quite as unprecedented as we thought. They make us feel less alone and help us find a way *through* that extremity, without lapsing into denial. That word, ‘through’, is actually key. The way we may get through what is coming is through entering more deeply into the reality and horror of it. Through disasters. Through painful emotions. Through facing what we are doing to our animal kin. And so forth. A key ally in this task is someone somewhat surprising.

Vaclav Havel – dissident playwright under communist rule in Czechoslovakia, and unexpected President of Czechia after it – wrote what is probably his most

important work at a time (the late 1970s in Eastern Europe) when acting on the basis of the truth was punishable by imprisonment – not so very different from now, in the West, as governments such as the UK’s move to criminalize active dissent. Furthermore, Havel wrote at a time when it seemed impossible to believe that the regimes whose systemic lies he called out could be vulnerable. In his great essay ‘The power of the powerless’ he charted a way in which those regimes *were* vulnerable: the immense power that comes from telling the truth when the system is *founded* on lies. This is the same power that has lately been accessed by Extinction Rebellion and the youth climate strikers, and which now fuels the emergence of a broader moderate flank in eco-action.

A beautiful precedent

In his essay, Havel sets out powerfully how, while some bear much more responsibility than others for crisis, we are all perpetrators and all victims, to some degree. It is no good outsourcing all the blame to government leaders and politicians (or, in our case today, to corporations). They are trapped in the system of the lie: in our case, the lie that things can only get better, the lie that capitalist growthism will find a way, the lie that they (we) ‘have this crisis covered’. The system of the lie is something we all share a responsibility for maintaining – or breaking. In our case, so long as nearly all of us nearly all of the time act as if we’re not off the cliff, it is impossible to take the kind of action that would be required to get back onto solid ground. We all-so-easily get (almost permanently) caught up in such pretences. We need to work methodically and repeatedly not to do so, and instead, to be *congruent* with the crisis – including, crucially, emotionally so.

It might be thought that it is a bit of stretch to compare Havel’s insights into this weakness of Eastern bloc communism with our insights into the weakness of triumphal Western neoliberal capitalism. It might be thought a bit of stretch because Havel was, one might suppose, not concerned with the ecological dimension of the situation, so the precedent he offers is only partially relevant: only relevant to the politics of the situation in a narrow, pre-ecological way.

But this thought can only proceed in ignorance of Havel’s actual text. For it turns out that he regarded tech-turbo-charged consumerism and its ecological consequences as absolutely central to what he was seeking to reveal in his great essay. It would be a total misunderstanding to ignore, crucially, the way that that essay culminates not (say) in a denunciation of the Secret Police but in a questioning of *technophilia*, of uncritical techno-optimism: the very attitude that binds together too many ‘greens’ with the so-called ‘progressive’ element of the ruling class. This is the very attitude that, above all, needs to be questioned by ecological citizens.

Consider this rich passage from Section XX of Havel’s essay, bearing in mind the remarkable fact that it was written fully 45 years ago:

The specific nature of post-totalitarian conditions [Havel’s way of describing ‘late’ Eastern bloc communism] – with their absence of a normal political life and the fact that any far-reaching political change is utterly unforeseeable –

has one positive aspect: it compels us to examine our situation in terms of its deeper coherences and to consider our future in the context of global, long-range prospects of the world of which we are a part. The fact that the most intrinsic and fundamental confrontation between human beings and the system takes place at a level incomparably more profound than that of traditional politics would seem, at the same time, to determine as well the direction such considerations will take.

Our attention, therefore, inevitably turns to the most essential matter: the crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole, the crisis that Heidegger describes as the ineptitude of humanity face to face with the planetary power of technology. Technology – that child of modern science, which in turn is a child of modern metaphysics – is out of humanity’s control, has ceased to serve us, has enslaved us and compelled us to participate in the preparation of our own destruction. And humanity can find no way out: we have no idea and no faith, and even less do we have a political conception to help us bring things back under human control. We look on helplessly as that coldly functioning machine we have created inevitably engulfs us, tearing us away from our natural affiliations (for instance, from our habitat in the widest sense of that word, including our habitat in the biosphere) [...] This situation has already been described from many different angles and many individuals and social groups have sought, often painfully, to find ways out of it. The only social, or rather political, attempt to do something about it that contains the necessary element of universality (responsibility to and for the whole) is the desperate and, given the turmoil the world is in, fading voice of the ecological movement, and even there the attempt is limited to a particular notion of how to use technology to oppose the dictatorship of technology. (Havel, 1985: SXX; my emphasis.)

Reading these two paragraphs, the vitality, prescience and contemporary relevance of Havel’s thinking is stark. What I have been seeking to do in my recent work (e.g. Read, 2022) might be described as accepting at last the failings of the ecological movement to date – failings and limitations he already intuited. I want to tell *that* desperately needed truth, and, on the basis of that truth, to start to chart what it would be for us actually, together, to decide to live eco-logically. Only such truthfulness can facilitate a truly vibrant ecological movement that will actually rise to the challenges of the day. Only then can we start to think beyond the ridiculous assumption that techno-optimism in league with consumerism – the very thing that got us into this mess – can get us out of it.

Resuming with Havel:

Various thinkers and movements feel that this as yet unknown way out might be most generally characterized as a broad ‘existential’ revolution: I share this view, and I also share the opinion that a solution cannot be sought in some technological sleight of hand, that is, in some external proposal for change, or in a revolution that is [...] merely social, merely technological, or even merely

political. These are all areas where the consequences of an existential revolution can and must be felt; but their most intrinsic locus can only be human existence in the profoundest sense of the word. It is only from that basis that it can become a generally ethical – and, of course, ultimately a political – reconstitution of society.

What we call the consumer and industrial (or postindustrial) society, and Ortega y Gasset once understood as “the revolt of the masses,” as well as the intellectual, moral, political, and social misery in the world today: all of this is perhaps merely an aspect of the deep crisis in which humanity, dragged helplessly along by the automatism of global technological civilization, finds itself. (Havel, 1985: SXX)

Again, I agree. The civilization we are possessed by is at one and the same time fated to come to an end, *and* seemingly implacable and immovable. We need to move further toward living in truth: about the desperateness of our plight, and thus about the level, the great depth of the response required. Politics is not enough. Activism-as-usual is not enough. What we are dealing with is what Havel called (in Section XVI) “a problem of life itself”. The occasion calls for *existential* transformation. All the more so, as we face now a greater threat even than Havel did: literally an existential threat.

And returning one more time to this, “the most essential matter” of his whole essay, here is where Havel brings home the direct relevance of his consideration of the power of the powerless to the West, not just to the East; even, he suggests, perhaps *more* so. And so, quoting once more at length his magnificent words:

The post-totalitarian system is only one aspect – a particularly drastic aspect and thus all the more revealing of its real origins – of this general inability of modern humanity to be the master of its own situation. The automatism of the post-totalitarian system is merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological civilization. The human failure that it mirrors is only one variant of the general failure of modern humanity.

This planetary challenge to the position of human beings in the world is, of course, also taking place in the Western world, the only difference being the social and political forms it takes. Heidegger refers expressly to a crisis of democracy. There is no real evidence that Western democracy, that is, democracy of the traditional parliamentary type, can offer solutions that are any more profound. It may even be said that the more room there is in the Western democracies (compared to our world) for the genuine aims of life, the better the crisis is hidden from people and the more deeply do they become immersed in it.

It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and

the industrial-consumer society, for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it. People are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies. But this static complex of rigid, conceptually sloppy, and politically pragmatic mass political parties run by professional apparatuses and releasing the citizen from all forms of concrete and personal responsibility; and those complex focuses of capital accumulation engaged in secret manipulations and expansion; the omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture, and all that flood of information: all of it, so often analyzed and described, can only with great difficulty be imagined as the source of humanity's rediscovery of itself. (Havel, 1985: SXX; my emphasis.)

This is why the matter that I have been concerned with in this essay – and that many of us have been concerned with in our attempt to start at last to fully tell the truth, in ways that the environmental movement had not done prior to 2018 – is so hard. In the West, in the global North, in actually-existing ‘liberal democracies’, it is hard for us to believe that we are so thoroughly in thrall, so thoroughly unfree. It is hard for us to believe that we are not living in the truth that we note (rightly) is routinely denied to the inhabitants of (say) Russia. But the obstacle that I have identified as perhaps the greatest of all to facing and living in climate-truth and (more generally) eco-truth, is the very attachment to ‘progress’, to a ‘positive’ outcome, to a smooth transition, that is coincident with being captured by the system of thought that rules us. Such is the hegemony of conventional hope – the lie that ‘everything is going to be okay’.

Consumer society endlessly tempts us to live within the lie. Havel stated this already in fact in Section VI of his essay; he merely elaborates the insight in the devastating passages from Section XX that I have just quoted. Many of us want it not to be true that we have already failed to keep ourselves safe; and that any prospect that there once was of a smooth transition has long gone. But ‘I want’ doesn’t get. It’s time for us to grow up, and to follow the lead that our children, magnificently but tragically, have taken since 2018.

The truth we seek to live

What will it involve, to grow up? What then is the truth that we are seeking to live within? It is, as I’ve argued previously in *The Ecological Citizen*, that *this* civilization is finished (Read, 2020). The only way we get to come out of this with most of what we love perhaps intact is if we accept this and seek to transform what we have. But this truth is desperately resisted – so desperately that even the desperation is masked, denied.

Please note: my claim is not that civilization *per se* is finished, nor that collapse is certain. My claim is that *this* civilization is finished. The only way we get to avoid collapse now is by creating an ecological civilization by way of *transformative adaptation*, and fast (<https://transformative-adaptation.com/>). This is (it would seem) very unlikely to happen, but we do not know it is

impossible, and so it must be striven for (though we should also undertake *deep adaptation*, to prepare for what is likelier – see Servigne *et al.*, 2020).

Together, our great power rests not in manipulating others to keep the show of activism-as-usual on the road, to keep one's NGO or whatever afloat with a production-line of new recruits. Our great power rests, rather, in telling the uncomfortable truth that we all of us have failed: yes, including XR and Greta too. XR's magnificent success in 2019 in changing – perhaps permanently – the conversation around climate has not resulted in its demands being actually met, and there is zero chance of those demands being met by 2025 (which is now at time of writing less than 1,000 days away). Only by facing together that we have barely reached first-base on climate and ecology, in terms of facing the epochal crisis together, let alone acting adequately on it, do we have any chance of rising at last to this great test of our time.

Ultimately, perhaps, this may demand the creation of what Havel (in sections XVII and XIX of his essay) called “the parallel polis”. Such alternative structures for self-governance will, almost certainly, become increasingly necessary as the failure of the state as we know it to address adequately our ever-increasing vulnerability to climate-mayhem and biodiversity-breakdown becomes starker. This parallel polis – that is just starting to come into view – is not a retreat from the real world; on the contrary, it is precisely a realistic engagement with the changing reality of that world.

The beginning is near

Virtually everyone is still calling for us to ‘mitigate’ our way to safety: they are pretending that we are not already in the age of consequences, the age when various avenues are already closed off by past failures. The attractions of this are obvious; the alternative is hard. But it exists. There is an alternative way of proceeding, even for politicians. Namely, seeking to acknowledge how bad things really are, and using that as a basis for an actual congruent wake-up call. So long as the ‘Yes we can’ rhetoric predominates, then there is never sufficient momentum or felt-need for mass action on climate and ecology – truly serious action, which would begin with genuine truth-telling.

Are we free to say what we want and need to, to tell that truth? The media is still, on the whole, tightly gate-kept. But mostly there is collective *self-censorship* (including in academia, though it must be said that here things are improving). Still, most people are unwilling to face up to climate reality in the way that for instance the think tank Green House has led on doing (<https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/tag/facing-up-to-climate-reality/>). There is still lots and lots of nonsense out there along the lines of ‘maybe COP27 will save us’. There isn't enough real willingness yet to look at saying something truly different, something ecocentric and realistic. Those of us who try to still sometimes get attacked.

What's the way out? Following Havel, I have suggested that we have to deal with our collective addiction. For we are all addicts (of fossil fuels, of growth, of ‘progress’); albeit some of us far less than others. We must address our collective addiction culturally, spiritually, politically, but most of all we must

address it *together*. This may sound ambitious. But remember: a reformed version of the *status quo* looks a pretty bad bet. A lot of the way that big tech is ‘doing climate’ is not remotely deep-green, nor remotely ecological. Dodgy offsets, for example, are central to it. Mainly, these offsets consist of planting trees. But many of those trees *are going to burn*. Some already have.

I move toward ending this essay therefore with the following questions: How can it be made *easier* for collective addiction to be revealed, and so more thoroughly to transform the system, perhaps quite quickly? How exactly can that be collectively facilitated? How do we best break on through to the other side, and manifest the power of the powerless?

Rather than seeking to answer the question any more than I have already done, I end with an anecdote. I visited Poland in 1987, as part of a group seeking to engage with dissidents there. At the time, Poland had long been under martial law. We were followed and intimidated, we undertook the first video-interview with Lech Walesa since martial law had been declared, and we smuggled it out of the country in an embassy bag.

I had a remarkable experience, there in Gdansk. Encountering citizens protesting even under martial law, singing pro-Solidarity songs, attending politicized church services (the Church being one of the few places where any organizing was still possible), I found myself coming to an extraordinary, seemingly absurd conclusion. Without understanding how it was possible, I became convinced that these people would win. I went back to Britain, and told many people of my conviction. They would typically ask me, “But how? How are they possibly going to win, against an implacable authoritarian regime?” I had no answer. All I knew was that I somehow knew that they were. I somehow knew that their authenticity – the truth that they were still living in the face of the lie of total state control and an unchangeable system; the lie of state-ideology – had itself an implacable power. Slower, but surer.

Two years later, it turned out I was right. In the dark times we are living, we need remembrances like that. We need allies and gurus like Havel. We need to know that what seems impossible can become possible, and then even unavoidable: through telling and living in the truth. Only then can something emerge which will stop us from heading ever deeper into a permanent ‘emergency’.¹

Note

- 1 I scare quote the term ‘emergency’ quite deliberately. As I have argued elsewhere, my “contention is that the emergency frame is actually too optimistic. It’s a form of denial about the width, depth, and tragic nature of the crisis” (Read and Knorr, 2022).

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