Live Not by Post-Truth – Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)

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Live Not by Post-Truth An Uncanny American Fascination with Eastern European Dissent Von: Martin Babička

Contemporary contestations of truth have led some to diagnose our age as one of "post-truth". In her 2017 essay, Marci Shore – a US historian who has recently fled the Trump administration for Canada – remembers the words of the Czech dissident and later president, Václav Havel: "Live in truth".1 This time, however, this dictum is not used as a defence against omnipresent "communist lies", but rather as an anchor in the era of "post-truth", supposedly dominated by the lies of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. On the other side of the political spectrum, Rod Dreher, a US columnist and a writer with links to the Danube Institute, a Budapest-based think tank serving the transnational neoconservative network, invokes the spirit of the Eastern European dissent in his 2020 book *Live Not by Lies*.2 Dreher turns to Havel's concept of a life in truth as an antidote to the "progressivism" of contemporary liberal elites whose "soft totalitarianism" of social justice supposedly denies the existence of objective truth in favour of dissecting power relations.

What both accounts have in common is an understanding of the socialist past as a totalitarian ideology, which allows them to use the legacy of the Eastern European dissent as a model for the struggle against new "totalitarianisms", be it Trump or the "woke elites". Much has been written about the use of totalitarianism as a paradigm in Eastern European socialist historiography, and most experts agree that the complexities of socialist societies cannot be reduced to a cartoonish image of a sinister, powerful elite controlling a subservient populace.3 However, even the idea of Havel as a protagonist in the fight against the "post-truth" era may be somewhat distorted.

Here, I want to focus on Havel's own involvement in the debates about scientific authority and political leadership. In February 1992, Czechoslovak President Václav Havel gave a speech at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos:

> In its deepest sense, the end of communism has, I believe, brought a major era in human history to an end. It has brought an end not just to the 19th and 20th centuries, but to the modern age as a whole. … The modern era has been dominated by the culminating belief … [that the world] is a wholly knowable system governed by a finite number of universal laws that man can grasp and rationally direct for his own benefit. … This, in turn, gave rise to the proud belief that man, as the pinnacle of everything that exists, was capable of objectively describing, explaining and controlling everything that exists, and of possessing the one and only truth about the world.4

Fig. 1: Václav Havel at the World Economic Forum in Davos 1992, Wikimedia Commons

In Davos, Havel challenged the idea that modern science was the only gateway to truth. His pessimistic view of science had a lot to do with the sort of critique that was cultivated in the Czech dissident circles, who looked to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.5

Havel's speech, reprinted in *The New York Times*, caused a stir. It was discussed at length, among others, by the physicist Gerald Holton in his book *Science and Anti-Science*. Written in 1994, the book was a defence of science against its critics during a prolonged exchange of arguments about the social and epistemic authority of science in what came to be known as "science wars".6 Holton saw a particular danger in "anti-science" sentiments becoming part of a political movement. To the astonishment of some of his colleagues, Holton took Havel as a representative example.

Holton devised "anti-science" as a mobilising concept against supposedly politically ambitious opponents. This kind of struggle was not entirely new in the scientific community. Historically, scientists used the concept of "pseudo-science" to single out what they deemed to be not just a bad kind of science but a particularly harmful use of science. This included alchemy in the 18th century, phrenology in the 19th century, and

eugenics in the 20th century, to give a few examples.[7] However, according to Holton, the “anti-science” types were different because of their negative view of modern rationality. Holton believed that the “anti-science” movement offered a counter-vision that threatened to undermine the authority of science as it challenged the very premises it was based on.[8]

In other words, Holton was worried about the replacement of rationality in both East and West with other kinds of judgements as a sure way to society’s decline. He observed a growing popularity of “mystics, clairvoyants, astrologers, extra-terrestrial visitors, [and] faith healers” in the recently collapsed Soviet Union.[9] He took these tendencies as evidence that the “modern” worldview – founded on “rationality”, “objectivity”, and “impartiality” – was fractured.

Indeed, historians of the Soviet Union inform us about how late Soviet people began to look for new metaphysical ideas, mystical practices, and transcendental experiences as a sign of dissatisfaction with the rationalistic worldview of the Soviet era.[10] This was driven by several factors, including the rediscovery of esoteric intellectual currents, the influence of indigenous traditions of the Soviet Union, and the rise of the New Age culture in the West. In the late 1980s, psychics, most famously Anatoly Kashpirovsky, appeared on Soviet television, as heralds of a new era in which “seeking” answers in the esoteric seemed to be the best way to respond to a sense of historical disorientation amid economic loss and an ideological void.[11]

Holton sounded the alarm on both continents, drawing parallels with similar developments in the West. If science was no longer what oriented people on their way forward, the only “cure” was a return to a “healthy” state “that is rational, progressive, anti-superstitious, pro-science, and free of the medieval curses of folk magic, miracle, mystery, false authority, and mindless iconoclasm”.[12] Havel’s provocative claim about the “end of modern science” encapsulated a sense that humanity was entering an era in which “objectivity” would be disregarded in favour of a “subjective” relationship with the world. However, what Havel saw as a positive development, Holton equalled to the decline of human civilization.

Holton even drew parallels between the hypothetical end of the modern era and the fall of Ancient Greece, which was said to return to the cultic and the magical after an era of rationalism.[13] Just like the Ancients gave in to religious ecstasy and mystical madness during their terminal decline in the Hellenic period, “Dionysians” of today questioned, in one way or another, science’s claim on objectivity. These included the likes of Sandra Harding, Bruno Latour and Arthur Koestler.[14] This diversity of authors illustrates the breadth of the “anti-science” label: Harding gave a feminist perspective of science; Latour turned attention to the constructionism of the scientific method; meanwhile, Koestler was an avid supporter of parapsychology. These thinkers had many reasons, even conflicting ones, for criticizing science, but they were a part of the same “anti-science” movement in the eyes of their critics.

This is also how, in a remarkable turn of events, interpreting the Eastern and Central European historical experience of the 20th century became key to defining the position of science in 1990s USA. For Havel, overreliance on scientific rationality was a symptom of the ill-fated socialist ambition to dominate the world through reason. As such, it had no place in a “free” world that emerged after 1989. As the symbolic leader of the anti-socialist opposition, Havel had an extraordinary charismatic authority both home and abroad. His speech provoked a backlash among the scientific community because his words mattered. Holton reacted to Havel’s criticism as follows:

Looking back on a century which might well be characterized, particularly by a Central European, by the forces of brutal irrationality and bestiality, in which the fates of millions were sealed by whims of Kaiser Wilhelm, Hitler, Stalin, and their henchmen, Havel finds the chief of trouble to be the very opposite, namely “rational, cognitive thinking” … and “the cult of objectivity.”[15]

An underlying question was the relationship between politics, rationality, and personal experience. Already in his earlier writings, Havel contrasted the objectivity of modern science with the “binding importance of personal experience–including the experience of mystery and of the absolute”.[16] At the World Economic Forum, Havel envisioned a “new, post-modern” face of politics, with leaders who rather than science trust their instincts, their own subjective experience, and personal insight.

Holton suspected that it was precisely Havel’s resentment of modernity that engendered anti-modern politics. He argued that from Ancient Greece to fascist Germany, anti-science movements had led to “the glorification of populism, folk belief, and violence, by mystification, and by an ideology that arouses rabid ethnic and nationalistic passions”.[17] While for Havel, socialism relied too much on rationality, Holton considered the very opposite to be the case, which is also why he thought that the critics of science not only misdirected their anger but could be the very source of the problem. Of course, the US wars over value and objectivity of science had their own agendas, and cynics would say they were all a smokescreen for a struggle over research funds, social prestige, or even male privilege.

Today once again, as in the days of Gerald Holton, Eastern Europe is invoked in the US debates over politics and truth. Yet in fact, there are some pieces missing from the puzzle: what were the actual views of Václav Havel and other former dissidents on these issues after 1989? As the legacy of Eastern European dissent is being resurrected by various political camps, historians ought to do what they do best – make things complicated again. Rather than showing them as mythical heroes whose wisdom can be summoned in times of need, we need to understand how these thinkers themselves helped shape the contemporary world. Havel’s unlikely involvement in the science wars is one of the puzzle pieces. If Shore asks whether “postmodern” philosophy is to blame for our current politics, we must ask why Havel in Davos called for “postmodern” leaders and perhaps even what this has to do with politics today. Have we all fallen victim to linguistic confusion, or are we just projecting?

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