

Ideology as ritual

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Václav Havel's greengrocer displays a sign in his shop with the words, "Workers of the World, Unite!" For Havel, the action, undertaken without much thought on the part of the petty merchant, provides key insight into the relationship of people to their environment and demonstrates the essence of ideology:

[T]he sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high. And that something is *ideology*. (Havel 1985, p. 28)

In this reading, ideology is not a set of beliefs held by a person or advocated by or for a person, but rather a semiotic veil, a means of distancing the signifier from the ordinary signified. Havel terms this the "excusatory function of ideology", and he argues that it is central to the survival of any post-totalitarian regime in a larger country, where the raw disciplinary power of a dictator will not suffice to establish control. The excusatory function is essentially that of deniability, or self-delusion, as the ideological signification of the signifier is attributable to something or someone outside of the speaker. That is, the speech act that is the placing of a sign by the potatoes or a perfunctory reference to Lenin in the introduction to a new volume of literary criticism is seen by the speaker as indirect speech; as a sign taken from an established socialist semiosphere, the stock phrase comes to signify less its intrinsic signification ("call for

the world-wide enlightenment of the working class and the establishment of international communism”) than the extrinsic signification, the origin of the sign (“phrase used by acquiescent of the society to express acquiescence”).¹

Ritual is ideology constituted from within members of society: “the greengrocer declares his loyalty [...] by accepting the prescribed *ritual*, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game. [...] [H]e has himself become a player in the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place.” (p. 31) By doing so, the greengrocer and all others “confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, *are* the system”. And, in doing so, they betray their human capacity for plurality and diversity and live within a lie.

As ideology is subsumed into (and constituted by) ritual, the previous denotation falls away, as the international class conflict on the greengrocer’s sign, and the ritual becomes autonomous of the regime and philosophy that led to its emergence. Power comes to be held by the ritual itself, less than by any elites, and the totalitarian nature of the society inheres to the constantly performed ritual of auto-totality and seems to be anonymous. (p. 33)

In “Power of the Powerless”, however, Havel argues that people ultimately are free to name things and capable of doing so; they can confront the anonymous and unmask it, call things by their own names, and live in the truth, thereby rejecting the unnatural dictatorship of ritual. Havel proposes a semiotic resistance, a call to arms for ordinary people to seize upon the slippage in the dominant signifiers to demand non-ideological signification; that is, truth. Havel is a humanist, and he is a believer in the potential for such discrimination and change.

¹Rather than intrinsic and extrinsic signification, we might consider “denotation” and “connotation”. I prefer the former pair because the signified of the greengrocer’s sign, in my reading of Havel, is the semiosphere of his society’s socialist-colored ideology itself; “workers of the world, unite!” can only denote “dominant rhetoric” in this society and the intrinsic signification is little more than a historical curiosity.

Prefiguring his central theoretical arguments in “Power of the Powerless”, Havel’s *Garden Party* takes the form of an extended semiotic experiment that slowly pushes the boundaries of familiar ritual statements until their signification is so illogical or inconsistent that the ideology qua ritual of the players’ society is thoroughly indicted. From Mr. Pludek’s stock political assessments, devoid of intrinsic signification, to Hugo’s rejection – by fiat – of the ritual² and consequentially his ability to deftly ascend to the highest echelons of contradictorily defined ministries. The play can be read as theater of the absurd, but it is vital that this theater’s absurd is the de-anonymization of ritual; it is the calling out of ideology, its naming as the root of society’s absurdity.

Havel asserts his basic humanism in “Power of the Powerless”; his argument takes as a given that humans, as a manner of course, tend towards freedom, towards diversity, from which it follows that autototality is an unnatural condition. This lends a certain confidence to his essay, confidence born of his dialectic view of the progress of history: humanity’s innate diversity will be challenged by its antithesis various post-totalitarian orders, but humanity will prevail, through the novel synthesis that is “dissidence”, living in the truth. It is no accident that a new specter is haunting Europe; Havel has, to a degree, reclaimed dialecticism for humanism and humanity.

Humanism, however important it may be for Czech philosophy and for Havel personally, is not a general axiom. If we reject this axiom, Havel’s conclusions on the relationship between ideology-qua-ritual can be replaced with entirely different ones, and the provocative and insightful discussion of autototality, excusatory ideology, and the societal construction of signification can lead to broader and less cheerful conclusions for all humanity. One recent such relatively

²Hugo’s transformation over the course of the play needn’t necessarily be treated as a conscious manipulation of ritualized fear; perhaps it amounts to little more than dumb luck. Still, the play is bookended by a chess motif (an actual game of chess, alternating turns throughout, and a declaration of “Checkmate!” in the end), which certainly encourages our reading of Hugo as empowered, in control of the absurd situation.

recent reading is found in Slavoj Žižek’s review of John Keane’s 1999 biography of Havel; Žižek notes that the civil society formed about the rejection of a country’s dominant ideology needn’t be a progressive phenomenon, but rather “there is no essential reason why it cannot provide space for all the politico-ideological antagonisms that plagued Communism, including nationalism and opposition movements of an anti-democratic nature.” Žižek seems inclined to accept the general proposition that people can resist the ideology that defines their lives, pointing out only that the option of “living in the truth” is equally empowering for the non-progressive.

Ritual as a dehumanizing and/or ideologically stabilizing phenomenon is also to be found in Polish and Hungarian cinema, in Andrzej Wajda’s *Man of Marble* (1976) and Miklós Jancsó’s *The Round-up*. The first takes as its subject an expository project on what must be seen as a reified ideology; the Man of Marble, preserved in statuary store-rooms and old newsreels. Agnieszka’s investigation pushes apart the seams in the received image of the shock worker, instilling the marble and celluloid with the breath of life; even as Mateusz Birkut’s story thickens, and his character becomes a real human being apart from his performative role in serving and shaping 1950s production ideology, we also see sexual reinvigoration in the shift from marble statue mounted by Agnieszka in the early scenes to her union with Mateusz’s flesh-and-blood son Maciej in the closing scene. Wajda depicts not only humanity’s overcoming of ideologization, but also the continuing internalized ideology that she encounters in the older generation’s relationship to history. The recurrent question of why anyone would dig up “ancient history” points to the self-enforcing autototality that Havel’s contemporary essay describes as the guarantor of the post-totalitarian order.

In Jancsó’s film, we see a form of ideology and its ritualization that does not arise from the regime’s means of control, but which is autonomously created and

recreated in human power relationships as a general principle. One of the more striking images of the film is the seeming inhumanity of the prison guards: their interchangeable faces and their physical and psychological brutality; the cool with which guard and commander run an innocent woman through a fatal guantlet or witness a half-dozen suicides points to the ritualization of oppression. In addition to the regime ideology of Austrian primacy, portrayed in uniforms and in music, there is the more immediate ideology of the prison guard. The prison guard necessarily must see morally justification for oppressing his prisoners, and this justification is provided by his very status as guard and the prisoners' status as prisoners. This dichotomy is, in Havel's terms, the "facade of something high" that enables the human guards to remain human while performing inhumanity.

The shift from stateist to personal and interpersonal ideology in *The Round-Up* marks an important expansion on Havel's basic argument, in that it frees the underlying resistance principle of "living in the truth" to be used in all manner of cases where ordinary people struggle with the inhumane rituals that society can develop. While the historical setting of the film makes a stateist reading reasonable (Austrian occupiers representing Soviet occupiers), the regime ideology is not central to the action; the film turns on human moments that are common to all societies, to a greater or lesser degree.

Returning to the Czech tradition, Milan Kundera's *The Joke* can also be seen as a novel drawing on the same concepts of ritual and ideology. For Kundera, ritual and ideology are central to understanding the psychological development of the characters. As has been argued, the novel is explicitly structured about a small set of characters representing specific psychological states; for our purposes, we can see these same states as relationships of the individual to diverse ritual-ideological complexes. For Kostka, the ideology of Christianity is precisely what enables him to comply with the rituals of socialist Czechoslovakia,

while the ritual and ideology of Christianity enable him to lie to himself, to live within a lie even as he convinces himself of his truth; his salvation of Lucie using Christianity, undertaken while in ideologically-justified separation from his own wife, reeks with the lies of human ideologized ritual. Jaroslav's obsessive concern with the past and its preservation marks him as a man who has whole-heartedly taken up the regime's ideology of folk culture. Jaroslav exemplifies Havel's formulation, in that he took on the task of propagating and living out regime ideology, himself forging new ritual with the new folk songs. Similar logic applies to Helena and her dedication to the party and its work. In *The Joke*, however, these rituals are portrayed as inherently unstable: Kostka cannot save Lucie or overcome his frequent doubts; Jaroslav comes to realize he has lost his family and his culture; Helena is sexually deviant from her overt ideology's demands. There is constant breakage. People will not cleanly submit to autototality. Ergo, Havel's humanism and faith is justified. Yet Kundera doesn't presume to portray anyone overcoming the contradictions of ritual and ideology; in later works like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, we see quite clearly that these contradictions are inherent to the human condition, and not merely a curiosity of the Warsaw Pact.

Where Havel's formulation of the co-createdness of ideology and ritual allows for individual rejection of the ritual, for, in his words, "living in the truth", George Konrád's 1969 novel *The Case Worker* presents a conception of ritual that is not easily shed, even by the "dissident" who is prepared to lose position and privilege. The titular public servant, over the course of the novel, openly discusses the rituals he performs and sees, then rejects the lot of them. The novel includes copious descriptions of ritualization; an early one discusses the standardization of the eulogy ritual: "eloquent phrases selected from published collections of funeral orations, classified according to the age, sex and rank of

the deceased. One after the other, in the order of their importance [...] came forward, and with their backs to the mourners, addressed themselves to the departed.” (p. 9) Here, funerary ritual is called by its own name; when the social and ideological structuring of eulogizing is laid bare, it sounds simply pathetic.

The ritual that enacts and defines dominant ideology in these states is total; Konrád provides a succinct portrayal of this totality in one of *The Case Worker's* interjected litanies: “If I sit at my desk with my head in my hands [...] if from my memory [...] I expel table-pounding ministers of war, official spokesmen who communicate nothing, [...] the season’s celebrities whose electronic smile invades every room, who unveil statues, taste the new wine, inaugurate highways, inspect guards of honor, kiss babies [...] then, even then, this day will be still pretty much the same as every other day.” (pp. 12-13) Consciousness of ideology and of the daily ritual does not bring the case worker escape. Konrád complicates Havel’s model; dominant ideology is defined and enacted as ritual, but he does not share his Czech contemporary’s faith in people’s unending store of vitality and diversity; ultimately, *The Case Worker* lacks the humanist conviction that sets Havel apart, and which attracted Žižek’s accusation of naivete.

Awareness, then, is all what we can hope for in Konrád’s formulation of life under ideology. The case worker offers an anecdote to explain his logic upon first considering staying with Feri Bandula:

I feel like the aging clerk who, after smiling at his companions and greeting his superiors at the front ranks, is just about to slip away from the May Day parade, when someone thrusts a heavy banner into his hands. Now he can’t leave, this cumbersome banner holds him fast; it’s tiring, it’s ridiculous, but he has to carry it [...] [G]rimly bidding good-bye to the hoped-for day of rest, he trudges onward on

swollen ankles, the heroic banner waving over his thinning hair (pp. 106-107)

The clerk is caught up in ritual, bound by ideology, but he participates fully cognizant of the burden that he doesn't know how to refuse. Konrád's narrator takes no pains to hide the absurdity of the scene, but it is built less on regime ideology than on the rituals of interpersonal relations that are universal. The specifics of May Day and of the banner are socialist, but the clerk's inability to escape an unwanted duty is rings familiar for any reader from any tradition.

As the case worker bears his metaphorical banner and comes to be responsible for Feri, we are introduced to a new mode of rejecting life's ritual: he withdraws from communally constructed life altogether. Leaving official work is standard fare for those who live in the truth, as we see in Havel's own experience, in the experience of the other Chartists, and in several novels, but Konrád describes a more radical rejection of ritual, as he seems close to rejecting commonly held concepts of humanity. Having considered the sirens of ambulances, police cars, hearses, and fire engines outside his adopted home in the communal apartment, the case worker concludes, "I am glad to be here, a resolute stay-at-home, rather than a bleeding incident inside one of them. I put my head out and pull it back again, I no longer know whether it's now or later, whether this is only a stopping place or whether I have definitely broken with my active, aggressive life." (p. 123) This is not Havel's rejection of regime semiotics, it is a more general solipsism, motivating (or motivated by) creeping slippage in all aspects of the case worker's life; what is human? what can we accomplish? The increasingly violent and ineffective methods he employs with Feri are equated to the violence of his signature, the fateful decisions he would pass in "forcing thousands of adults to do things they didn't want to".

In the end, though, Konrád's protagonist returns to his cases and resumes

his repudiations and proscriptions, his control over those thousands of adults, though without the least conviction that he is serving something higher, that there is an ideology that might provide him the comfortable distance that lets the greengrocer unthinkingly place his sign among the radishes. Referring to those who profess higher beliefs, the case worker states:

I refuse to emulate those Sunday-school clowns and prefer – I know my limitations – to be the skeptical bureaucrat that I am. My highest aspiration is that a medium-rank, utterly insignificant civil servant should, as far as possible, live with his eyes open.

Konrád ends the novel with a litany of clients, pages of human types and their complaints, who all will come to see him, to talk, to be together. People can experience one another, and they can experience the world around them, eyes open. This is ultimately a positive conclusion, and one that is fairly consonant with the idea of living in truth; to wit, we can live and act within the strictures of society's rituals, but we must be conscious of what truly surrounds us, willing to see and to recognize others. This is a fundamentally humanist assertion that is rooted in calling things by their own names, yet it lacks any of the faith in transformation that marks Havel's landmark essay.

Havel's "Power of the Powerless" was a programmatic statement, a philosophical exercise with the overt intent of describing, explaining, and promoting the nascent Charter 77. It is therefore not surprising that it comes to a more ideologically strident conclusion than do works of literature, and that it strikes a hopeful chord in its analysis of humanity's encounter with autototality. In literature and cinema, we find more nuanced and contradictory accounts of ritual, ideology, and humanity, but, even as they challenge Havel's optimism, they still highlight the importance of collectively realized ideology and ritual as a fundamental aspect of human culture, within and without the specific post-

totalitarian context that first motivated this mode of analysis.