

Living in the Age of Covid: 'The Power of the Powerless'

by Michael Rectenwald



A specter is haunting the world: the increasing prospect of a new totalitarianism under the extended covid response. Unlike the specter of communism, or the specter of “dissent” to communist dictatorship that Václav Havel ironically identified in his groundbreaking essay “The Power of the Powerless,”^{[1](#)} this specter originates from those in power and not from the revolutionary or the powerless.^{[2](#)} And rather than haunting only Europe or Eastern Europe, this specter casts its long shadow across the future of all humanity, such that one wonders how one might plan, if at all, for this future.

Mixed into this spectral fear are grave doubts promoted by some about the intentions of world leaders and a medical and technocratic elite apparently bent on new lockdowns, masking, and mandatory mass vaccinations.

Heterodoxies burgeon in the shadows. The mere mention of these

heterodoxies will rank one among the heterodox. Nevertheless, I venture to name them. They include the belief that a mass eugenics program is underway and that the vaccination regime amounts to the greatest crime against humanity in world history. They include the belief that the entirety of the covid response has been nothing if not a means for increasing the power and control of the elite over the world population. And they include the more modest claim that “the science” being peddled by “the experts” has been hastily and erroneously construed and represents a grave series of errors, yet merely errors after all. Another claim is that the covid crisis, while real, has been opportunistically used by the ruling elite to further a preexisting agenda for resetting the world economic system and forever changing the shape of the social order (the Great Reset). These claims are not necessarily mutually exclusive and two or three may either be held simultaneously or all four juggled. That these and other heterodoxies are being rigorously suppressed, and that their messengers are either cancelled or vilified, or both, only lends them subterranean force and adds to the overall anxiety, whether spoken or not. While I will not adjudicate all these claims, it is enough to say that their existence is part of the terror campaign that is the covid regime itself. It is as if the mendacity of the regime spontaneously generated them.

You may wonder why I suggest that the extended covid response poses the gravest threat to humanity, rather than believing that the real threat is covid-19 and its variants. I will address this question below. But the question underscores the fact that clear precedents for this situation are nonexistent. The world has never seen anything like it and could not have—before the age of digital communications, modern virology and epidemiology, and pharmacological technology.³ What makes the covid regime different from other totalitarian prospects is the fact that “disease” is now the stated basis for its establishment. The ideology is thus infused with the dominant

narrative of protecting the population from a pestilence, rather than delivering a future worker's paradise, for example. This claim by the authorities makes any opposition to their diktats forever fraught with having to refute "the science," variously and inconsistently delivered by "the experts," while demonstrating the incommensurability of the response to the perceived threat. The question of freedom becomes embroiled in the question of what freedom means in the face of a possible death sentence, for oneself and others. And yet there is the possibility that the efforts at mitigation themselves amount to a death sentence.

In seeking comparable scenarios to the covid regime, I thought it time to look to Eastern bloc exemplars of resistance. As such, my search led me to the essay that forms part of my title. However distinct the two scenarios, parallels may be drawn between what Havel called the "post-totalitarianism" of Soviet bloc Czechoslovakia and the system developing out of the covid crisis. The issue at stake is pursuing "the aims of life"[4](#) in the face of ongoing terror. It should not matter what side of the fence you are on if pursuing the aims of life is your agenda.

Post-totalitarianism

By post-totalitarianism, Havel did not mean a state or condition after totalitarianism. He meant a new form of bureaucratic rule, a totalizing system in which power does not simply originate from a singular dictator and flow downward, but rather one that involves the entire society and conscripts the population into its very structure. "In the post-totalitarian system," Havel suggested, "this line [of power] runs *de facto* through each person, for everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system."[5](#) Everyone is forced to "live within the lie," and all subjects become "agents of its automatism"—automatic receivers, messengers, and executors of the post-totalitarian logic.[6](#)

Havel provides an example of one such subject: a typical greengrocer. The greengrocer routinely puts a sign in his storefront window that reads, "Workers of the World Unite!" He does so, not necessarily because he believes in the semantic content of the slogan, although he may. But he puts the sign in his window because he would become conspicuous by the sign's absence if he did not. By posting the sign, he consciously or unconsciously seeks to stay out of the crosshairs of severe repression.

The greengrocer's sign is ideological because its semantic content is "noble" while its semiotic function works in an opposite direction. Its function is to ensure conformity to a system that has nothing to do with the welfare of "the workers." (Under communism, it is the Marxist true believers who live in "false consciousness.") The sign is just that—a semiotic syntagm that signals compliance and complicity.

And the sign feeds into a wider "panorama" of compliance and complicity while compelling others to do the same. The greengrocer's plastering of the sign is a piece within a system that enrolls its subjects in its own administration, subjects who by their participation ensure the participation of others and who together help to constitute post-totalitarianism at large:

If an entire district town is plastered with slogans that no one reads, it is on the one hand a message from the district secretary to the regional secretary, but it is also something more: a small example of the principle of social auto-totality at work. Part of the essence of the post-totalitarian system is that it draws everyone into its sphere of power ... so they may become agents of the system's general automatism and servants of its self-determined goals.... More than this: so they may create through their involvement a general norm and, thus, bring pressure to bear on their fellow citizens. And further: so they may learn to be comfortable with their involvement, to identify with it as

though it were something natural and inevitable and, ultimately, so they may—with no external urging—come to treat any non-involvement as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society. By pulling everyone into its power structure, the post-totalitarian system makes everyone instruments of a mutual totality, the auto-totality of society.[7](#)

Not everyone can live the lie of ideological conformity under post-totalitarianism, however. Havel points to those who begin to “live within the truth.” They no longer feign belief and thus cease to be complicit with the system. But those who do so are promptly cancelled:

Let us now imagine that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogans merely to ingratiate himself... The bill is not long in coming. He will be relieved of his post as manager of the shop and transferred to the warehouse. His pay will be reduced. His hopes for a holiday in Bulgaria will evaporate. His children's access to higher education will be threatened. His superiors will harass him and his fellow workers will wonder about him. Most of those who apply these sanctions, however, will not do so from any authentic inner conviction but simply under pressure from conditions, the same conditions that once pressured the greengrocer to display the official slogans. They will persecute the greengrocer either because it is expected of them, or to demonstrate their loyalty, or simply as part of the general panorama, to which belongs an awareness that this is how situations of this sort are dealt with, that this, in fact, is how things are always done, particularly if one is not to become suspect oneself.[8](#)

Thus, the noncompliant is marked by his lack of signaling. He is isolated and demonized. He becomes a pariah and is exiled from the community. He loses his status and faces hardship, or

worse. Sound familiar?

Yet such persons as the greengrocer may eventually join with others to constitute a “hidden sphere,” a counterpublic that by its very adherence to living within the truth challenges the post-totalitarian system at its core. That’s because the system is constructed from a tissue of lies and the mere existence of people who defy the lies poses a threat to this construction. They betray the mendacity of the system and may shake others’ belief in it as well.

And what is meant by living within the truth? The pursuit of the aims of life in defiance of the diktats of the ruling establishment and their agents among the population.

The Real Resistance

Havel makes clear that this hidden sphere is not a political movement per se, but rather a prepolitical formation that has no program and posits no alternative system in its place. It is not a political opposition as such. Although it may develop “parallel structures” and a “parallel polis,” its prepolitical character is necessary for its effectiveness—because of the impossibility of real political opposition under a single party system; because alternative political paradigms are utopian within the post-totalitarian context; because, given an expected cynicism, no one believes in alternative political paradigms anyway; and primarily because the hidden sphere develops organically and constitutes a concrete way of living rather than an abstract model for another world. Dissidence derives from a background of people’s attempts to live within the truth. It is not a matter of formal structures and will not emerge from, or necessarily as, political parties or institutions:

There is no way around it: no matter how beautiful an alternative political model may be, it can no longer speak to the “hidden sphere”, inspire people and society, call for

real political ferment. The real sphere of potential politics in the post-totalitarian system is elsewhere: in the continuing and cruel tension between the complex demands of that system and the aims of life, that is, the elementary need of human beings to live, to a certain extent at least, in harmony with themselves, that is, to live in a bearable way, not to be humiliated by their superiors and officials, not to be continually watched by the police, to be able to express themselves freely, to find an outlet for their creativity, to enjoy legal security, and so on.[9](#)

The appeal is to “the aims of life” and not to any strictly political means and ends.

Yet Havel’s efforts and the efforts of his compatriots eventually did assume a political significance and managed to create another world. But only, he would argue, by having remained true to their original, prepolitical character. That is, they arose from the ad hoc efforts of communities to defy the lies in concrete efforts to live their lives with dignity and in the truth:

[A]re not these informal, non-bureaucratic, dynamic and open communities that comprise the “parallel polis” a kind of rudimentary prefiguration, a symbolic model of those more meaningful “post-democratic” political structures that might become the foundation of a better society?[10](#)

Havel believed that something positive and previously impossible could emerge from post-totalitarianism. Post-totalitarianism was the crucible within which this something could be forged and from which it could usher forth. This something was a more genuine way of living, which post-totalitarianism made possible and necessary.

Finally, Havel suggested that the incipient world always existed within the present one:

For the real question is whether the “brighter future” is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?[11](#)

Covid Post-totalitarianism

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that the covid regime resembles, in many respects, the post-totalitarian system described by Havel. Regardless of “the science,” or rather because of it, the covid regime is post-totalitarian. “The science” has proven itself to be ideological. Although continually discredited—by the exaggeration of the virus’s lethality, by the suppression of known cures so as to usher in a state of emergency and the mRNA vaccines, by the underreporting of vaccine deaths and injuries, by the institution and reinstitution of failed and unscientific lockdown and masking mandates, and more—“the science” is wielded by authorities as if a matter of fact and a matter of course, just as Marxist ideology was wielded by Soviet communists. And, as under communism, even those who know the truth are compelled to live within the lie.

Just as the greengrocer was compelled to display signs of his loyalty under Soviet bloc communism, signs transmitting semantic content to which he was indifferent, so the covid citizen is compelled to display signs of compliance and complicity under the covid regime. The signs have included donning the mask and, increasingly, displaying the vaccine passport—to take part in society. And, as under communism, these displays are compulsory rituals. What function do they serve?

Let us take note: if the covid citizen were compelled to wear a sign that said, “I am afraid, therefore unquestionably obedient,” he would not be nearly as indifferent to its

semantics, even though the statement would reflect the truth. The covid citizen would be embarrassed and ashamed to don such an unequivocal statement of his own degradation, and quite naturally so, for he is a human being and thus has a sense of his own dignity. To overcome this complication, his expression of fidelity must take the form of a sign which, at least on its surface, indicates a level of credulousness in the covid regime. It must allow the covid citizen to say, "What's wrong with the vaccine passport? The experts say that the vaccine is necessary, for my health and that of others." Thus, the vaccine passport helps the covid citizen to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, while at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. The vaccine passport hides them both behind the façade of something high. And that something is ideology.[12](#)

The italicized text above is my revision of a passage from Havel's essay—with "the covid citizen" and "vaccine passport" of the covid regime replacing the greengrocer and the greengrocer's sign of the Soviet regime. The point is to show, *mutatis mutandis*, the substitutability of terms. Although the vaccines have shown some efficacy at mitigating the effects of the virus, they neither protect their recipients from infection and disease nor prevent them from spreading it. And the dangers of the vaccines are not all known, although many short-term side effects, including death, have been documented. The vaccines may also be driving antibody-dependent enhancement, and, with the selective pressure they put on the virus, the production of mutations (variants). The vaccines are, after all, "state of emergency" measures, rushed into use before the necessary scientific testing to gauge their efficacy or ensure their safety could be done. Thus, they are anything but "science"—if by "science" we mean unhampered and open inquiry using the scientific method. The vaccine passport thus serves an ideological function, just like the greengrocer's sign.

But just as in the Soviet bloc, some covid citizens are living within the truth. They know that masks, lockdowns, and mandated vaccines have by no means been sufficiently scientifically validated. These dissidents constitute a not-so-hidden sphere, a counterpublic. They have begun to create parallel structures and a parallel polis to resist the covid regime. As in Soviet bloc Czechoslovakia, they are not aligned with any political program and hold to no utopian idealism. Although in the United States the majority are Republicans and lowercase libertarians, many are not. They represent a prepolitical formation. Rather than needing a political program, these dissidents seek community in "the continuing and cruel tension between the complex demands of that [covid] system and the aims of life, that is, the elementary need of human beings to live, to a certain extent at least, in harmony with themselves, that is, to live in a bearable way ... "

Yet their efforts may eventually assume a political character and may manage to create another world, and covid post-totalitarianism may be the crucible in which this other world is forged. They may be developing a more genuine way of living. And they may find that the "brighter future" is not that distant after all. It was there all along, and only blindness and weakness had prevented it from being seen and developed.

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