



Elzbieta Matynia, ed. and trans. *An Uncanny Era: Conversations between Václav Havel and Adam Michnik.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014. (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-300-20403-2.



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Ideas from Another Era

Václav Havel used to criticize what he called a focus on the “technology of power” by many politicians of his day. The Czech dissident-playwright, who became the first president of his country after the fall of communism, is most famous abroad for his criticism of the Soviet-style system, but this criticism about the “technology of power” was not directed exclusively at the former red potentates of Eastern Europe. It was also levelled at the postcommunist leaders who came after the crumbling of the Soviet monolith, and perhaps by extension to many Western politicians.

The “technology of power” was meant to signify the means by which a political leader or group attains power and then holds on to it. This involves, as any modern political advisor or campaign chair knows, understanding the electorate, developing a handful of popular deliverables, managing the message, and exploiting your opponent’s weaknesses.

To be sure, few hard-headed observers of politics would suggest one can get by without some such prac-

tices. To Havel, however, the problem was that this “technology of power” had become an end in itself for many of its practitioners, and in some ways, perhaps for the entire political class. Such an approach leaves little room for honest debates about ideas, let alone a truly participatory democracy.

While such lofty thoughts on democracy may seem hopelessly idealistic in our era of complex, postindustrial societies, it seems clear that an increasing number of people feel alienated from representative democracy as currently practiced in the developed world. A glance at the low voter turnout rates across Western democracies and polls showing a distrust of politicians and feelings of alienation from political institutions would appear to confirm that something is wrong. Added to these feelings are the evident widening income inequality, anemic economic growth, and endemic unemployment among some segments of society.

One wonders whether the purveyors of “key messages” and “talking points” are really able to convinc-

ingly handle these challenges of our era. Rightly or wrongly, many seem to think they are not. This has led to the rise of a motley assortment of demagogues, from the Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński of postcommunist Europe, to the Geert Wilders and Le Pens of Western Europe, to Trump and his ilk in the United States. In an age of a teleprompter politics that seems incapable of addressing the very real challenges posed by globalization, this menagerie of tough-talkers has hit a chord.

A new collection of conversations between Havel and the Polish dissident and newspaper editor Adam Michnik (translated and edited by Elzbieta Matynia) is timely in this regard. The two intellectuals had similar starting points but followed divergent paths in the postcommunist trajectories of their respective countries. Michnik, a former dissident in Poland who spent years in prison under the communist regime, became the editor-in-chief of a major Polish daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Havel, a dissident playwright who founded the Charter 77 human rights group and also spent years in prison under a communist regime, became the president of Czechoslovakia, and later, of the Czech Republic.

The book brings together a series of interviews and conversations between Michnik and Havel beginning in the 1980s and ending with a postscript by Michnik written shortly before Havel's death in 2011. Michnik and Havel were part of a group of Czech and Polish dissidents who gave their respective secret police followers the slip in order to meet at the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1978, where they shared their thoughts on communism as well as food and shots of a Czech spirit called *Starý myslivecký*—a practice that was repeated in subsequent years by other dissidents from the two countries.

At that first meeting in the summer of 1978, Michnik asked Havel to write an essay expounding his ideas on the communist system. This eventually became "The Power of the Powerless," Havel's most famous essay, which was smuggled across the border to Poland, where it was translated and appeared in the Polish underground quarterly *Krytyka*. In the essay, Havel famously describes the impact that a greengrocer could have in a Soviet-style system by simply refusing to post a slogan supporting the regime in his shop window, as was expected of everybody in the Czechoslovakia of the 1970s and 1980s. That early meeting and collaboration between Michnik and Havel led to an enduring friendship that continued after the collapse of communism and the accompanying twists and turns in their careers.

While Matynia's collection of essays and conversations packs more substance than its 252-page length might suggest, the reader is left wanting more. The dialogue format of most of the book's entries lends itself to the development of ideas, but the exchanges often fail to delve deeper because of the fundamentally similar worldview of the two protagonists. Dialogues involving more opposing views might have helped to bring the ideas out in a more rigorous fashion.

As it stands, readers may squirm at the congratulatory tone and awkward modesty of some passages. Michnik repeatedly declares his admiration for Havel. One of the conversations, which features two additional Polish and Czech writers, is telling. "Mr. President, why don't the Czechs have their own Adam Michnik?" asks the Polish journalist, and another Czech writer chimes in, "Why don't we have an Adam Michnik and the Poles have a Václav Havel?" (p. 135). The two subjects demur, with Michnik wondering why the Czechs would need a Michnik, and Havel declaring that such questions "provoke an avalanche of doubts" in him (p. 135).

Such passages do serve a purpose, however, in that they capture some of the adulation that has been heaped on these men by their supporters and followers—sentiments that were not shared by all Poles and Czechs. In fact, the opponents of both Havel and Michnik were, and are, numerous and powerful. Havel often attributed such dislike for former dissidents to feelings of guilt on the part of those who did not openly oppose the regime. Paradoxically, some of those people were to become virulent anticommunists after the regime collapsed—perhaps in an effort to cleanse their reputations. In the face of such trumpeted hypocrisy, Michnik once remarked sourly, "I was not such a coward then to need to be so brave now." [1]

The question of what to do about the legacy of communism in the region is a major dividing line. Havel and Michnik both have been attacked by their opponents, some of whom were also dissidents, for encouraging a soft approach to the crimes of former communists. This question of transitional justice continues to reverberate through these societies more than twenty-five years after the crumbling of communism. The current leaders of Poland are from a segment of the country's political class that views the negotiations between the communists and Solidarity activists in 1989 as having introduced a corrupt system that benefits the former members of the communist nomenklatura and secret police. The discussions between Havel and Michnik on this topic underscore just

how difficult it is for a society that has been ruled by an all-encompassing party apparatus, which included millions of Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks as members, to deal with justice for those who abused that power and privilege. Havel himself notes in the book how he struggled with his own country's "illustration" law, which was designed to prevent former Party officials as well as people who served in the communist-era security services and their collaborators from assuming important posts in the public service, military, state-owned firms, and media, academia and the judiciary. Havel notes that the law is flawed, based on collective guilt and overly reliant on the files maintained by the secret police, but also acknowledges that some kind of legal norm, after all, is needed in a transitional era to address this issue (pp. 33-41). These attitudes and internal struggles led many in the strident anticommunist camp, especially in Poland, to denounce the likes of Michnik and Havel.

On many questions raised in these conversations, both Michnik and Havel do not hesitate to push back against the widely held beliefs of their compatriots, whether that leads them to defend the rights of minorities or point out the crimes that their own countries have committed in the past, such as the mass deportation of German minorities after World War II (pp. 102-103). They both believe in a moral dimension to politics.

This does not, however, imply pacifism. In a fascinating passage, Michnik appears to defend the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq as a moral stance against a vicious regime that had violated the basic human rights of its citizens (p. 131). Havel adopted a similar stance on Iraq and also when it came to the bombing of Serbia in 1999 over the Kosovo crisis. This is a muscular liberalism, willing to resort to force when necessary in the defense of higher values. Today, in surveying the wreckage of Iraq and the rise of vicious sectarianism across that region, one wonders whether this stance simply served to mask an ill-conceived militaristic adventure that was perhaps carried out with decidedly un-Havelian intentions.

Be that as it may, this points to something fundamental about these two men. They are not easy, bland humanitarians that were content to retire from public commentary once their primary goal of undermining the apparatus of Soviet-style communism had been achieved. They were always concerned with something beyond their im-

mediate horizon, even in the darkest days of communism. Indeed, many dissidents, from Russia's Sergei Kovalev to Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi, have suggested that their opposition to the regimes they lived under was based on a broader and deeper understanding of the purpose and meaning of their lives.

It is natural, then, that they should speak out on global issues. Perhaps the farthest-reaching observation that Havel, and to a lesser extent Michnik, had to offer was his critique of modernity and the technologically oriented society we live in. Havel uses the term "atheistic" to describe this society, while Michnik, less comfortable to agree that society can exist completely bereft of metaphysics, sees it somewhat differently (pp. 129-130). Nevertheless, the core of the critique is that our social structures are measured against a kind of technological-scientific standard that is bereft of a higher moral purpose. This has led to the careless exploitation of our environment and a relentless devotion to material wealth and gratification at the expense of deeper reflection on where we are going as a civilization. In one telling passage, Havel notes that he recently saw a news report on a major investment that a foreign company was going to make into the Czech Republic, citing the amount of the investment and the jobs it would bring, but completely disregarding any details on what, exactly, the firm would be manufacturing and whether it was a beneficial product for society (p. 132).

This blind devotion to technological progress without regard to the ultimate meaning or purpose of that progress is at the core of an approach to politics that is focused on the "technology of power." The question posed by Havel and Michnik is whether these technologists can possibly provide the answers to the questions of our age—economic inequality, environmental devastation, sectarian violence, and extremism. And if not them, then who? We may already be witnessing a response in this season of populist politics across eastern and western Europe and the United States.

Note

[1]. Konstanty Gebert, "Post-Communist Europe: Twenty-Five Years After the Collapse of the Ancien Regime," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2014): 96-97.

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