
The Price of Velvet: Thomas Masaryk and Václav Havel*

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Abstract: The study is concerned with the specific nature of two velvet revolutions in Czech history – in 1918 and 1989 – and with the philosophy of the two men who lead them – T. G. Masaryk and V. Havel. Havel opposed an indisputably repulsive regime, whereas Masaryk stood against a regime that he was to reject late in life and after much hesitation. That is why Masaryk had to seek deeper reasons for the revolution, i.e., the Czechs' departure from the Hapsburg empire. He legitimated the renewal of the Czech state with his specific concept of the philosophy of history. The world evolves from theocracy to democracy, the Czechs having provided the impetus to this trend in the past (i.e., in the Hussite movement), but having lost touch with this democratisation process after the Battle on the White Mountain. With their fight against absolutism and the establishment of a democratic state, they returned, in Masaryk's view, to the mainstream of European history. This reliance on the meaning and strength of democracy was destroyed by the Munich Agreement, the resulting shock decisively contributing to the radical change in the Czech political and geographical orientation, i.e., in the search for another philosophy of history in Marxism. Havel has not constructed his political vision on the philosophy of history but on the belief in democratic values. Both men, however, stress moderation in political changes and implicitly accept a rather high level of continuity with the overturned political structures. The price of such a velvet approach in politics can, however, be high and have long-lasting effects on the political culture of a country.

Czech Sociological Review, 1995, Vol. 3 (No. 1: 45-57)

There are some marked similarities between Masaryk and Havel as well as some significant differences. Both are 'President-Liberators', who helped bring about, or at any rate, give form to, the transition from a repudiated regime, to one more liberal and in due course endorsed by the nation. Masaryk actually found himself being formally attributed this title: somehow, I have the feeling that this precedent will not be followed in the case of Havel. Both were/are intellectuals and moralists, deeply concerned with the moral basis of politics, and in particular, the moral basis of their own participation in politics. Each had, in the days which preceded victory, been part of a small minority of opposition to the regime which they eventually replaced.

Havel opposed a regime which was vile, and outstandingly repulsive even by the exacting standards, in these matters, of 'really existing socialism'; Masaryk, by contrast, opposed a regime whose condemnation remains profoundly contentious, and which he himself only came to reject very late in life, under the impact of rather exceptional circumstances, and after prolonged inner hesitation. Havel's great moral achievement was to defy the revolting communist regime at all and to show that someone at least had the

*) This article is based on a review of Václav Havel's [1992] *Summer Meditations on Politics, Morality and Civility in a Time of Transition*.

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moral fibre to do so; Masaryk's achievement, prior to his fateful decision early in the course of the First World War, was not to defy the regime – he was an active participant in it as a Member of Parliament and in other ways – but to fight moral though unpopular causes which often infuriated his compatriots more than the regime. He took a firm stand in support of the unmasking of fraudulent manuscripts intended to demonstrate Czech medieval glories and a firm stand in a ritual murder accusation against a Jew, notwithstanding the fact that in his inner feelings, as he later confessed to Karel Čapek, he never overcame an instinctive negative reaction to Jews. To infuriate both the national vain-glory and the anti-Semitism of his co-nationals – what a strange way to political fame, or notoriety, for a man who finally made his mark on the world scene as a great *nationalist* leader! There is, however, logic in this paradox: his nationalism was only justified, as he came to explain in his writings, due to the implementation of an inherently moral historic plan.

In each case – and this is very significant – the transition from the repudiated *ancien régime*, to the more democratic new order, had a *velvet* quality. The complicity in the course of transition with the previous, disavowed regime, has profound implications for the nature of the moral problems faced by the respective Master of Ceremonies, so to speak, of each of the Transitions. This is especially true in Havel's case.

The original declaration of the Czechoslovak state in Prague on 28 October 1918, had a profound, historic-philosophic meaning for Masaryk, which he expounded in detail: it terminated the links between the Czech nation and the Hapsburg dynasty, which in turn stood for theocratic absolutism and the Counter-Reformation. Political absolutism, Masaryk was to say contemptuously, was derivative from Church absolutism: 'the theory of the monarch's and state absolutism is nothing but the kibitzing of the theoreticians of clerical absolutism and dictatorship'(!) as he says in *Světová revoluce* [Masaryk 1925: 573]. The absolutists of the state, whilst eager to liberate themselves from Church tutelage, were at the same time most eager to inherit some of its infallibility. In this work, incidentally, he also stressed, very early, the manner in which the infallibility of Bolshevism and that of the Counter-Reformation lead, along an identical path, to the Inquisition. His early rejection of Leninism – in this he resembled Russell – was based precisely on the fact that he saw, in its appalling proclivity to Infallibility doctrines and feelings, precisely those trails which he rejected (even in their attenuated, age-softened form) in the regime he eventually overturned. One should add that Masaryk's appreciation of Bolshevik realities was based on an intimate, deeply affectionate, but illusion-free knowledge of Russia. But the main point is the *meaning* of the first Czech revolution of this century for its acknowledged leader (who was, after all, a professional philosopher and a professor). What did it mean to him, why did it fit in with the wider meaning of history?

What the event in the end meant to him is clear. It has a double meaning, though the two themes are related, and confirm each other. On the one hand, the establishment of the Czech state is not an isolated event: there is absolutely nothing *Sinn Fein-ish*, of 'ourselves alone', of a proud national self-sufficiency, about Masaryk's thought; there is no question of going it alone, either ideologically or in political action. Quite the contrary: the Czech revolution is both vindicated, and incidentally, made feasible, by the fact that it is a part and an example of a much wider and global process, a replacement of theocracy and absolutism by democracy, which incidentally carried with it the independence or self-determination of nations. There is not the slightest element of defiant affirmation of the will of one nation: national independence is both validated and made possible by

being part of a much wider, and *deeply moral*, process. There is a kind of other-directedness about Masaryk's thought which is characteristic of the modern Czech spirit, or was until recently, and which inspired both Masaryk's philosophy and his political strategy. The political aim had to be vindicated as a corollary of the overall historical trend, and the strategy consisted above all of doing things which would persuade the leaders of world opinion that Czechs were worthy members of the world-historical club. He was a little inclined to confuse the acceptance of the Czechs by History with their acceptance by the Great and the Good in the West: consequently, he confused national policy with national image-creation and propaganda, and encouraged, unwittingly, the illusion that if this enterprise were successful, the nation would be safe. To believe or presuppose all this was to overrate the firmness, and dedication to the Democratic Direction of History, amongst Western leaders. No wonder that Munich was a trauma for the nation which became, to a considerable extent, Masaryk's reverent disciple.

So, a great deal will depend on whether he did indeed understand the wider process of history correctly: some of his compatriots, early and late, had their doubts on this score, and the debate concerning Masaryk's reading of history is one of the most interesting themes in Czech intellectual life. Incidentally, Masaryk's 1925 book was in due course translated into English as *The Making of a State*, whereas the Czech title means *World Revolution*. The English version can be justified on the grounds that it gives the reader a far more accurate account of the actual contents of the book, which is a fascinating description of Masaryk's activities and thoughts during the First World War period, and which eventually led to the establishment of the Republic. A subsidiary reason for the English title is that the Western publishers did not like the Bolshevik-sounding stress on *revolution* in the title. But in a deeper sense, the English title is an appalling mistranslation: the Czechs weren't creating their own state out of some capricious wilfulness or opportunism; they were, on Masaryk's account, doing it because this was part of an overall trend which was both global and deeply moral. Masaryk wanted it clearly understood that he would not be seen indulging in state-creation, unless it was manifest that it was morally right to do so *and* history had decreed that it should be done – and these two conditions were linked to each other, for history did not do things lightly or without good cause. Like the men who drafted the American Declaration of Independence, he was not going to indulge in state-creation lightly, without due cause and deep philosophic reflection. No State Formation without Philosophic Justification! The victory of their nationalism was the victory of democracy, reason, sobriety, scepticism, individualism. It was not something to be undertaken lightly.

But, and this is the second theme in Masaryk's interpretation of the great transformation, the Czechs weren't merely jumping onto a bandwagon, belatedly and without having made much of a contribution to it. They had once, in the late Middle Ages and early modern times, been at the very heart and forefront of that movement which they were now re-joining: *that* was the deep meaning of Czech history. The Czech Hussite proto-Reformation of the early fifteenth century was crucial and was followed by the socially radical practice of the Taborites ('Tabor is our programme' was one of Masaryk's mottoes); by the militarily brilliant defence of this movement by Jan Žižka in defiance of the crusading and imperial forces; and a little later, by the elective monarchy of George of Poděbrady, with his historically premature scheme for international peace and security. All this showed that the Czechs were not passive beneficiaries, but distinguished

contributors to that movement which had at long last prevailed in 1918, and which amongst other things established the Czechoslovak state.

The Czechs had been deprived of this distinguished and pioneering role in the world trend towards democracy by the outcome of the Battle of the White Mountain, and the whole meaning of Masaryk's revolution was precisely the reversal, after 300 years, of the verdict of that battle. Otto von Bismarck was another person who, it appears, once spent an entire night pondering on ,what if' the Battle of the White Mountain (which in 1620 decided the victory of the Counter-Reformation in the Czech lands, and excluded the Czechs from the political map of Europe for 300 years) had only gone the other way: Czech Bohemia would have remained Protestant, it would have aligned itself with Protestant Prussia, Austria would have remained an insignificant Marchland, and Protestant Bohemia would have helped Prussia to dominate the Danube valley and open the way to Baghdad. (To dream of beginning the *Drang nach Osten* in the seventeenth century would seem anachronistic, but let that pass.) Masaryk's opponents, as he himself mentioned [Masaryk 1925: 595], invoked Bismarck's one-night reverie in justification of their Catholicism and Austrophilia: what a good job we *did* indeed lose on the White Mountain, for otherwise the Prussians would have Germanised us in the course of using us as their Protestant allies. This is of course the Austro-Slavism argument, clearly articulated in 1848, and much vindicated in the age of Adolf and Josef: without something like a Hapsburg Danubian empire, we (and other small nations of Central and south-eastern Europe) are caught between German expansionism and Russian autocracy. Masaryk himself was much worried by the latter, and not insensitive to the force of this argument throughout his earlier years.

It is possible to criticise Masaryk's philosophy of history, which he used to justify the creation of the Czechoslovak state, from a number of quite distinct positions. It is possible to say that it is too optimistic and rationalistic, that it overrates both the Enlightenment and the commitment of the West to it. History is not guided by a Providence which acts as a guardian angel for liberty and reason: the forces which were unleashed in the 20th century are less being than that. The age of Hitler and Stalin gave much support to such a reaction, and it was voiced by the philosopher Jan Patočka when, in a samizdat publication, he observed that Nietzsche might have been a better guide to the realities of our world. Ironically, by the end of the century, looking back at the successive elimination of both Right and Left anti-democratic regimes, the Masarykian vision seems to have come back into its own, as Jiří Musil has observed. For the time being, it looks as if the democratic liberals may have inherited the earth...

It is possible to criticise him as a historian. Is it really correct to see the early 15th century Hussites as precursors of the French Revolution, or is this, on the contrary, an utter anachronism? Did the Hussite handling of religious deviants really anticipate modern theories of the rights of man? The doubts concerning Masaryk's interpretation of the 15th century go hand in hand with more immediate doubts concerning his perception of his *contemporary* compatriots: he may have committed an error not only concerning the Czechs of the 15th century, but equally concerning those of the 19th and 20th. Are their roots really in the heroic turbulence of the 15th century (whether on behalf of a precocious Enlightenment, or, on the contrary, of a mediaeval religious enthusiasm), or rather, in a localistic, inward-turned reaction *against* the Enlightenment? The Enlightenment centralised and consequently Germanised, and the initial „Awakening“ of the nation at the end of the 18th century was provoked by the opposition to this tendency. The Hussite

theme was only injected into the national movement subsequently. This counter-interpretation can and does invoke conspicuous features of modern Czech character, the thrift and caution above all. Thinkers such as Peroutka, Patočka and Pekař did indeed make this point against Masaryk. It is to be noted, as an example of Masaryk's personal liberalism, that when Peroutka published a book stressing this view, Masaryk arranged for him to be provided with funds enabling him to found a journal (*Přítomnost*, which did in fact become the best and most influential intellectual periodical of the First Republic).

At a more abstract level, his very approach to history is open to criticism: the very pursuit of a national essence, stretching from the Middle Ages to the industrial world, is highly questionable. A historian such as Pekař would hold not merely that the real Czech soul is located in 18th century peasant baroque and not in 15th century extremism but would also point out that Europeans of any given period share more with each other, than members of nominally continuous ethno-linguistic groups share over generations. Europe at any one time is a unity, but the „same“ nation over time is not. Ironically, the sentimental particularist Pekař had a more realistic sense of European unity, than the more universalistically minded Masaryk. Part of the nationalist programme was to endow each nation, and particularly one's own, with a permanent character and role and its own contribution to the concert of nations. This is probably an illusion.

These philosophical and historiographical disputes are not without important practical implications. The First Czechoslovak Republic, dominated by the spirit of Masaryk (*une dicature du respect* as the French put it), had a foreign policy based on philosophy. National security depended on being locked into the French-led system of alliances, involving, on the one hand, the USSR, and on the other, the three states of the Little Entente. This provided not simply a link with the French Army and its allies, but also, with the Spirit of World History: France and the West incarnated the movement of mankind towards democracy and reason, which, in the long run, was irreversible and invincible. So the French alliance was a philosophical as well as a military commitment.

1938 and 1940 put paid to all this. The lesson was bitter and sank in deeply. From then on, it was possible to go in a number of directions. History *does* have an underlying direction, but it is not the one recognised by Masaryk, but perhaps the one announced by Marx. That path was of course taken by the Communists and their fellow-travellers, indeed by all those who organised and accepted the events of February 1948. Of course they were not allowed to say it in those words, but they *could* have said in 1948 – we are only applying Masaryk's doctrine as explained in his *World Revolution*: there is indeed a world-historical and authoritative trend, but we have made some adjustments, in the light of the events of 1938, 1940 and 1945, concerning the identity of the forces which really overcome the old regimes.

It was also possible to take quite a different turn: Masaryk's vision, which led to such disaster in 1938, is a form of a delusion of grandeur. It really casts us for a greater role than too bitter. Let us attend to our own garden. Small is beautiful, especially now that our own little garden has been cleansed of most foreigners (and our own Mezzogiorno has declared independence, letting us get on with the job without the interminable need to worry about its amour propre). Something of this spirit perhaps underlies the curiously pragmatic, not to say opportunistic Europeanism of the current Czech regime. There is an eagerness to enter Europe, without any conspicuous interest in whether Europe stands of 1789 or anything of the kind: what we want is your market not your soul. Apart from that we wish to be masters in our own house and are not eager to hear

any homilies about our treatment of gypsies. Our contribution to the world- historical process does not interest us greatly and we are not interested in the job of being the West's missionary in the East. Masaryk's problems have no need to learn political table manners and have little interest in whether they are acquired by those to the East of us.

It really looks as if the nation vacillated between an openness which is at the same time unduly other-directed, and an inward-turned self-sufficiency. Patočka claims that at the beginning of the national revival, there was a deference to Catholic Europe and a desire to re-establish oneself in its eyes, regain Hapsburg favour, perhaps make Prague the centre once again. Then came a certain flirtation with panslavism, though on the whole, the rational Austro-Slav argument prevailed – a Danubian federation would be the best protection from German domination and Russian autocracy. Masaryk in the end turned his back on both these options and, in the name of respect for the great liberal undercurrent of history (allegedly expressed in Bohemia by the Hussites and the Brethren, but aborted on the White Mountain), committed the country to a client-like Western orientation which then received a rude shock at Munich, and led to the replacement of the West by Moscow. (When the Pole wrote his book on „Elephants and the Polish Question“, the Czech wrote *his* on „The Soviet Elephant – our glorious model“.) Now, after all this pursuit of models, a new inwardness, confident of its capacity to participate in Western affluence, but otherwise abjuring more generous aspirations, with a Prime Minister who incarnates this mood, and a President who conveys a deep disquiet about it.

But anyway: for Masaryk, the momentous events of October 1918 in due course became, all at once, the fulfilments of history's deepest design, and a long-delayed correction of the 300-years-old distortion of the history of his own nation. All this being so, one would expect at least a little drama and blood, especially in view of the fact that some of those who had striven for the moral trend of history, had been executed for High Treason against the Hapsburg monarchy. Not a bit of it. Though the phrase was not yet current, the revolution and transfer of power of 1918 already had a velvet quality. Masaryk stresses the calm, bloodless character of this *coup d'état (převrat)*. He himself distinguishes it from a revolution, and notes it only happened after a revolution in Vienna, and after the collapse of the Austrian front in Italy. Everything was done by negotiation, not by violence. It took a fortnight to complete the process: technical problems, Masaryk observes, made it impossible to proceed faster. The new authorities were first of all recognised by the old ones as *jointly* competent and co-responsible (something to be repeated in the second historic vindication of democracy, by Havel, against a much nastier autocracy). It was surely no accident, Masaryk observes, that the new authorities first of all took over the supply ministry, thereby ensuring themselves the control of the military [Masaryk 1925: 475]. He notes that otherwise the military constituted a grave danger to the newly proclaimed political order, but with supplies well under control, they could be brought to heel.

In Havel's case, the transition was similarly courteous and so to speak technical. He had helped overturn an exceptionally nasty and totalitarian regime (none of this could be said of the order displaced by Masaryk), but it all seemed to be a matter of request and agreement: „...even the Communist president resigned at our request (*sic*)“, he notes with pleasure and a touch of surprise. This revolution did indeed proceed in the idiom of requests and resignations.

Once upon a time, Czechs used to throw the agents of foreign powers out of the window of Prague Castle: the first time round, onto pikes, the second time, onto a soft

dungheap; but the third time round, a polite request for resignation is graciously accepted, and incidentally, an Assistant Satrap turns around and becomes the new Prime Minister. He was not thrown out of a window of Hradčany Castle. This time, there would have been no dungheap to soften his landing. It is all part of a tradition.

The interesting thing is that Prague Castle has in this century experienced virtually the entire gamut of possible regimes: Hapsburg Counter-Reformation traditionalism, Masarykian liberalism, Hitler, a short interregnum, Stalinism, another interregnum, Brezhnevism, and now Havel. But, every single time, the outgoing powerholders negotiated, haggled a bit if they could, and *signed*. President Hácha signed to Hitler, General Toussaint, commander of the German garrison in May 1945, negotiated his retreat with the Czech National Committee. Even K. H. Frank, the last Reichs-Protektor, finding that the Czech negotiators disliked addressing him and preferred the German soldiers, politely resigned so as to aid the negotiations. (This did not however save him from being publicly hanged in Prague about a year later.) Beneš handed over power to the communists, Dubček signed to Brezhnev, and Masaryk and Havel both tell us in detail how they indulged in political conveyancing. Havel, for instance, tells us with pride [Havel 1992: 23] how even the dropping of the term ‚socialist‘ from the official designation of the country, which in other ex-communist countries was ‚dealt with... in an hour‘, was in Prague carried out with parliamentary propriety. Come to think of it, Prague must possess a unique store of experience in Political Conveyancing, and the Law Faculty of Charles University really should institute a special Chair in this discipline. (All this procedural fastidiousness did not at all times prevent a fair amount of murder taking place after some at least of the negotiated transfers of power, notably in May 1945 and after February 1948, but that is another matter.) This is not necessarily a bad thing – why should changes always be hallowed by blood, why should partnership of past and present not also be reached across revolutions? – and maintain the rules of courtesy? – but it may on occasion also raise moral problems. It was not quite the same problem for Masaryk as it is for Havel, but it is interesting to see how they face their respective dilemmas.

Masaryk’s problem was that he had to explain why the Hapsburg empire, which he had supported for so long, had after all to be destroyed. It could not have been quite so evil, if it had been endorsed for so long. Masaryk, who saw clearly the effects of Counter-Reformation and Bolshevik infallibilism, did not consider the possibility that sanitised, mellowed authoritarianism may be a useful ally of democracy. Many feel nostalgia for it now: better Franz Josef than Josef! Masaryk himself conceded [Masaryk 1925: 449] ‚after all, we had, almost all of us, for so long maintained and defended the necessity of the Austrian empire to the whole world!‘ So what had changed now? The Hapsburg empire had failed to improve itself, he would say, and so the confrontation of the First World War had to be seen as the struggle between democratic good and authoritarian evil. As one of his most eloquent, and ambivalent, critics, Václav Černý, observes [Čapek and Hrubý 1981: 106], this led him into one or two contradictions. One arose from the somewhat strange inclusion of the Czars in the camp of liberal democracy. The other was far more serious: the overrating of the allegedly unambiguous, and it would seem definitively victorious, democratic revolution, the ‚World Revolution‘ which gave his book its original, Czech title.

This belatedly acquired conviction led to the implicit, but deeply pervasive syllogism, which imbued education in the republic which Masaryk set up. The West is democratic, the West is strong, it is democratic because it is strong and strong because

democratic, and because this is the way world history is going. We had been in on this splendid movement sooner than most, as early as the fifteenth century, we had been unjustly deprived of our birth-right, but now we are safely back where we belong, and so we are indeed safe, for the democratic West is very powerful, and all's well with the world. I had my primary education, and two and a half years of secondary education, in Prague schools, and I can only say that this message emanated, unambiguously and confidently, from the portraits of the President-Liberator which adorned every schoolroom. Major premise: world history is our guide and guarantor. Minor premise: world history has chosen democracy and the West as its agents, and therefore they are irresistible, and their allies (notably ourselves) are safe.

Now what happens to people who very deeply internalise the entire syllogism, notably its major premise, but who are suddenly subjected to a dramatic and traumatic demonstration of the falsity of the *minor* premise? Precisely this is what happened to the Czechs in 1938 and 1940. Munich demonstrated that the West was neither firm nor loyal to its democratic acolytes. As Thurber might have said, there is safety neither in numbers nor in democracy nor in anything else. The humiliatingly quick defeat of the French Army in 1940, previously vaunted as the best in Europe, in 1940, conducted the lesson. But what if the major premise continues to be persuasive, and the historical Trend is still authoritative? But a new minor premise is now available: history appears to be endorsing a new force in the East, capable of defeating the Germans who had defeated the French. The expulsion of three million Germans, fear of German revenge (a fear very vivid after 1945) and the recollection of Munich, all jointly propelled any waverers to the same conclusion: there can be no thought of resisting Stalin.

I do not wish to caricature Masaryk. There can be no questions of his endorsing democracy simply because he believed in to be strong and victorious. He valued it for quite independent and moral reasons, but he *also* believed it to be vindicated by manifest historic destiny. And here the trouble is not merely that the verdict of history is not quite so unambiguous, as his critics insist (Patočka, Černý, *Masaryk in Perspective* [Čapek, Hrubý 1981]), but, more seriously: the syllogism which he prepared, and which the educational system set up under his authority inculcated, led inevitably – given the replacement of the falsified minor premise by what then seemed to be the historically correct one – to the passive acceptance of 1948.

The truth is both ironic and bitter, but inescapable: Masaryk's philosophy of history did eventually lead to 1948. Nothing could be further from his wishes or values, but the iron laws of logic lead to this conclusion. If it is *World Revolution* which provides the signal for the correct political direction in Prague, but if (in the light of further events) Western democracy turns out to be a feeble, disloyal and ineffective agent of that great revolutionary trend, but a more powerful and steady herald appears to the East... well then, the conclusion is easy to draw. Those who carried out, and those who accepted, the communist coup of 1948, were acting in harmony with the syllogism which Masaryk had taught them so insistently: they continued to respect the major premise which affirmed the authority of World History, they merely replaced the minor premise discredited by Munich by a new one concerning what now seemed the dominant thrust of history, and proceeded in accordance with conclusion. The *World Revolution* must be implemented in Prague.

Havel's problem, and his solution, are rather different. Havel, unlike Masaryk, does not face the awkward question of why he had turned against a system which he had

accepted and endorsed for so long, and within which he had worked comfortably. Masaryk openly reports how, early on during the First World War, he went to see the Hapsburg viceroy in Prague, a man who was alleged to have in his possession a list of people due for eventual arrest, which included Masaryk's own name. , (He) was a decent man, and it was possible to talk with him fairly openly.' How cosy, how *gemütlich*, personal- political relations were in those days! No, Havel does not face this problem, the system he opposed was unambiguously repulsive, and Havel had always opposed it, at considerable cost to himself.

Havel's problem is not why he had turned so late against a system previously held tolerable and worthy and capable of reform, but rather, why, given that the system had been overturned, so much of its heritage was tolerated. Why quite so much velvet? Why try to reassure the old apparat by choosing one of their number for the first free prime minister? Why so much concern with technical continuity of government, somewhat more justifiable in 1918 – the *ancien régime* had the legitimacy of genuine antiquity, and it had no horrifying crimes against humanity on its conscience, whereas the communist one had been guilty of 40 years' sustained mendacity, much murder, sustained blackmail of its own citizens through educational persecution of children; and it was also guilty of high treason and collaboration with a foreign occupation. There are of course good reasons for being soft on the erstwhile collaborators with totalitarianism, and for leaving them with their gains: it is better that they should go and enrich themselves further, rather than smuggle their money abroad; and it is better that they should try to save themselves by conversion to the market, investing in capitalism the funds stolen under communism, than by turning to chauvinism. (One reason for the inevitability of the Czech-Slovak split is that the Czech apparat seems to have chosen the former option, and the Slovak one, the latter - and the two strategies will not mix.) Also there are too many of those who in one way or another were compromised with the previous regime, too many borderline cases, too many factual ambiguities. There is a plausible theory which maintains that right-wing dictatorships can be liberalised far more easily than left-wing ones, because the old powerholders can be offered the retention of their wealth as their reward for surrendering power, whereas in left-wing totalitarianism there is *only* power, and no wealth, in the technical sense, available for retention. The Czech velvet revolution would seem to provide a counter-example to this: ill-gotten gains, and insider information and positions, are used by the old gains, and insider information and positions, are used by the old apparat to turn themselves into the *nouveaux riches*. It may be good for the economy, but all the same, it does leave a bad taste in the mouth of many, including Havel himself.

Havel's own most strongly expressed complaint concerns the moral decline: ,society has freed itself, but in some ways behaves worse than when it was in chains' [Havel 1992: 2]. There is a great deal that can be questioned, in both parts of this statement. Did *society* free itself? On the very next page, Havel himself remembers that , a handful of friends and I were able to bang our heads against the wall for years by speaking the truth about Communist totalitarianism while surrounded by an ocean of apathy.' This society had accepted the communist regime, without enthusiasm but with resignation, to such an extent that when liberation came from outer space, those liberated quite literally could not believe their luck, and kept looking over their shoulders nervously for some new set of tanks to arrive to put a stop to it all, though this time there was no place for those tanks to come from.

There is a blatant contradiction between crediting the victory to his society, and also castigating it – correctly, alas – with apathy. And two pages later, once again, he claims victory, not, this time, for society at large, but for his own moralistic style: ‘Communism was overthrown by life, by thought, by human dignity’ [Havel 1992: 5]. Was it indeed? Masaryk defended his ultimate political option by a philosophy of history which is interesting, stimulating, contentious, and which turned sour and fatal for the nation politically re-established in its name: but it deserves discussion. Havel’s political philosophy – uncompromising decency in the face of sleazy, cynical opportunist and unscrupulous dictatorship – is heroic and humanly admirable: when, however, it is presented as a *theory* of how such dictatorships can be overcome, or when he goes as far as to say that this was the *only* way to do it [Havel 1992: 5], it becomes absurd, indefensible, and can easily be refuted from evidence provided by himself. Two senses can be attributed to Havel’s motto *Living in Truth*: it can mean (1) not allowing oneself to be bullied into affirming falsehood by a vicious regime, and (2) not allowing oneself to indulge in high-minded illusions because they make one feel good. Havel’s record under (1) is superb. But it would not be altogether easy to give him a clean bill of health under (2).

This contradiction in Havel’s thought is taken to task, for instance, by one Peter Fidelius (a pen-name assumed in the days of clandestinity, but which the author chooses to continue to use) in *Literární noviny*, a Prague literary weekly, of 6 June 1992. Either communism was destroyed by something other than our society, says the author, or our society cannot be quite as rotten as Havel complains: he himself, Fidelius, says he inclines to the latter alternative.

But the first option seems to be endorsed from a surprising source: Petr Pithart, Prime Minister of the Czech lands after the Velvet Revolution, who begins by noting that he had only used this expression in quotation marks: what he means is not that it failed to be velvety, but that there was no revolution. With brutal candour, he says that he refuses to use the term revolution, that there had been no conflict, that the decomposing communist power had only lasted as long as it did because ‘we’ had tolerated it, that amongst comparable communist societies we had been the last, and arrived ten minutes after midnight. He proceeds to excoriate the post-velvet authorities (clearly including himself) for culpable light-heartedness and benevolence, notably in being soft on the old power-holders in the Ministry of the Interior. The paper quoting these remarks (*Necensurované noviny*, no. 12, 1992, a fortnightly) does so with an ironic *No Comment*, as if to say ‘listen who’s talking...’.

Pithart is an erstwhile dissident, and earlier still a communist, who, while dissident, wrote and published, in samizdat and abroad, under the per-name Sládeček, a remarkable analysis of Czech history and of communist guilt (in which he shared), named simply ‘68. Pithart clearly has a penchant for *mea culpa* self-analysis.

Of the three positions, Havel’s, Fidelius and Pithart’s, it is the third which would seem to be correct. Communism was not destroyed by society or by honesty, it could dominate the former and contain or corrupt the latter: it was, whether we like it or not, destroyed by consumerism and Western militarism, plus an outburst of decency and naivety in the Kremlin. Faced by a double defeat in both the consumption and the arms races, the Soviet leadership chose to liberalise politically, in the simple-minded and quickly refuted expectation that this would rapidly lead to an economic improvement. To their credit, a measure of liberalisation was to their taste anyway, whilst economic

liberalisation went against the social grain. In consequence, Eastern Europe, some of which was supine, and some of which would have settled for far less liberty than has now fallen from heaven, is free.

So Masaryk's and Havel's moralisms are not the same, and they do not face the same problem. Masaryk was a bit of a puritan as well as a moralist. He does not merely see the link between Counter-Reformation and Marxist Infallibilism; he also dislikes Catholicism for its transcendentalism, which drives its acolytes into that sexual mysticism so conspicuously present in modernist literature, and which Masaryk heartily disliked. It is Catholics, not Protestants, who are susceptible to this. This view led him into difficulty in the case of D. H. Lawrence, whom he was obliged to declare an exception.

Both Masaryk and Havel are open to the accusation that they take far too seriously the Czech national motto, *Truth Prevails*. It cannot be relied upon to prevail, even in the long run, and, as Keynes said, in the long run we are all dead. Masaryk used as his background premise a view of the dominant position of democracy in the contemporary historical process, a view which let down those who put their trust in time, in the days of Hitler and Stalin. To do him justice, Masaryk only seemed to embrace this views wholeheartedly when he had a need to justify his choice in the 1914-18 war: previously he struggled on two fronts, defending concrete social realism against the more extreme romantic historicists. Havel, a superb playwright but an amateur social theorist, puts his trust, not in an overall historical theory, but in the eventual victory of simple decency. In as far as he is saying that decency should be maintained come what may, one can only admire him. When he says that this is politically effective and that there is no other way, one must part company with him. Illusions will not do anyone any good.

What had really prevailed in 1989 was consumerism and the all-European endorsement of a system which satisfies its imperatives, as against one which conspicuously fails to do so, and is oppressive and sleazy into the bargain. Democracy and decency obtained a free ride to victory on the back of the consumerist triumph, and while we must be duly and deeply grateful for that, it is dangerous to delude oneself and suppose that they owed the victory to their inherent political appeal. In an ideal world this would be so, but in the world as it is, this is doubtful. We must of course admire those who had bravely stood up for decency even when it was not victorious but perilous: this is why both Masaryk and Havel deserve our admiration. But it does not mean that we must also accept their general theories concerning why victory was guaranteed. Real loyalty to Masaryk lies in respecting truth, however unpalatable, and not to his specific views on history.

The two men differ considerably in what they have to offer on that point. Masaryk's theory is worked out with academic craftsmanship; it is also contentious, and did, ironically, at a later point, lead the nation in a direction he would have abhorred. Havel's theory is one he only affirms when he formulates his credo, but also proves to be mistaken when he concretely describes what actually happened, or when, in his splendid plays, he lays bare the mechanics of how it happened. Communism was not, alas, overthrown by life, by thought, by human dignity, as he affirms. In his realistic moments, in his literary descriptive work, Havel knows better. There he describes, with superb irony, precisely how it is that truth does/did *not* prevail. The society Havel knows and analyses so well, and now also excoriates, accepted communism, without enthusiasm but with resignation. Masaryk's conception of democracy was somewhat Protestant and puritan, and he would, I think, have been embarrassed by some of the allies it acquired in its

second coming (a permissivist pop culture and the Counter-Reformation Church). He would probably have shared some of Havel's disillusion, and deplored some aspects of the contemporary scene which are less unacceptable to Havel.

Masaryk's philosophy of history is open to objections: Havel lacks a philosophy of history, but the cluster of ideas which acts a surrogate also deserves critical scrutiny. There seems to be a mixture of moralism, populism, decency and romanticism. Havel is confused both on the question of what it was that brought down communism, and how one is to face the demoralisation which follows it. Communism was *not* brought down by decency or internal opposition, but by the recognition in the Kremlin that it had lost both the arms and consumerist races, and by the decision to try to correct this by emulating rather than blackmailing the West. We must be grateful for that decision whilst noting that, from the viewpoint of the interest of those who made it, it probably was not the best option. We must be grateful for *their* relative decency of the time, but not credit the local decency of dissent, brave and admirable as it was, for more effectiveness than it had.

As for providing a moral basis for late industrialism or for a society converting with dreadful speed from communism, that is indeed a problem. Sheer human decency is admirable, but on its own, it is no more likely to attain such an end than it achieved the end of communism. I do not myself believe that this important endeavour will benefit greatly from the phenomenological or Frankfurt traditions of thought, which threaten to slip into at least part of the vacuum left behind by Marxism. A woolly anti-scientism certainly will not help: science may be dis-enchanting, but it is *not* dogmatic. It is really very wrong to confuse these two things: because science destroys illusions, which it does, it in no way follows that it therefore protects some other dogma from scrutiny. To assimilate the scientific spirit to Marxism is the height of unfairness: Masaryk, at any rate, was utterly lucid on this point and saw that Marxism and science were mutually incompatible. What the scientific spirit does undermine is claims to unsymmetrical, hence inegalitarian, privileged sources of knowledge (whether Revelation or Revolution). But the fact that it undermines *your* illusions does not mean it enshrines anyone else's. This is a tempting, but wholly impermissible inference.

Still, there is a link between the two men. Havel is enough of a child of Masaryk's republic to recognise explicitly the principle honoured by the first Czechoslovak state, that only professors are fit to be heads of state. When he comes to dream aloud and paint the idyll of the Czechoslovakia which he is trying to build [Havel 1992: 102 an.], he says, in so many words: 'At the head of the state will be a grey-haired professor with... charm.' This is indeed the Masarykian model of presidency. The First Republic only had professional presidents: non-professors, let alone non-academics, need not apply. Even the potential rival of Beneš for the presidency, who was critical of Masaryk as a historian, was a rival *professor*. Had the timing of the collapse of Marxism been different, Prague would no doubt have had a President-Professor in Jan Patočka, and tradition would have been upheld, but times have changed, either that or no professor with an appropriate record was available.

So the professor offered us an overall theory of what is happening and should happen, whilst the playwright brilliantly described how what really does happen is manipulated into being, whilst saying something quite different in his professions of faith. Perhaps we need a combination of the two. The French have Racine to tell them how men should be, and Corneille to tell them what they are really like: the Czechs have, in

Havel, a person who performs *both* tasks, one as theorist and the other as playwright. But it will be interesting to see whether professors or playwrights make better presidents.

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MASARYK
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IT JUST GETS
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