

Interview between Timothy Snyder and Lenka Kabrhelová:

Biography: Timothy Snyder is an American historian of Eastern Europe who teaches at Yale University. He was born in 1969 and describes himself as belonging to “the very last Cold War generation.” Snyder’s first contact with Václav Havel was “in translation, on the printed page, in the early 1980s.” He met Havel for the first time in person in Bratislava in 2009 at the Central European Forum, at which both men spoke.

Snyder refers to Havel’s texts – in particular *The Power of the Powerless* – as continually stimulating for both his own writing and teaching. Reflecting upon his most recent publication, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Snyder says he “literally could not have done it without Havel.” The historian believes that students, and American young people more generally, can learn from Havel’s philosophy that “resistance is thoughtful... and that thoughtfulness is a kind of resistance.”

In this *Havel Conversations* interview, Snyder reflects upon some of the contradictions and near “impossible” tasks that faced Havel upon becoming president in 1989. He comments on the centrality of human rights to Havel’s foreign policy, as well as the ways in which the late Czech president was “abused” by members of the US political establishment. Snyder characterizes Havel as an inspiration and point of reference for champions of civil society today, discussing in particular the case of Slava Vakarchuk, a massively popular Ukrainian musician and activist.

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Chapter I: Context – An East European Humanist, 00:00:31

Lenka Kabrhelová (LK): So thank you so much, Professor Snyder, for finding time for us – if we may start from how you met Václav Havel. Do you still recall the circumstances and what impression he made on you?

Timothy Snyder (TS): Václav Havel existed for me when I was a very young person, and indeed, he was younger than, as well. A good quarter century passed between when I started reading Václav Havel and when I met him. And by the time I met him I was also, myself, a very different person. So, for me, and I think, for a number of my friends who were coming of age in the United States in the late-1980s – for those of us who were interested in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union – Havel and, for that matter, Bohemia, the Czech Republic, was a kind of alternative to the way we had been taught to think about the world. So, I belonged to the very last Cold War generation, I mean in the sense that my entire upbringing took place in the Cold War, and then the Cold War ended just as I was becoming an adult, so I got the full treatment of bomb shelters and, you know, air raid warnings, and every Sunday at 12 o'clock the church bells rang as a test for the nuclear warning. My entire childhood there was a church tower and, at 12 o'clock on Sunday, it rang as a test of what we would do if there were a nuclear attack. So for us, for people of my generation, the way that we thought of Eastern Europe was very indirect: Eastern Europe was the place that the missiles came from, and the place that the missiles came from was the Soviet Union. So then the place to think about and to study was the Soviet Union; if you were going to learn a language, then you would learn Russian, and if you were going to learn a literature, then you would learn Russian literature. So Eastern Europe was a kind of abstraction, and a kind of threat.

And then so Bohemia, Czech literature, and Havel in particular emerged as a kind of alternative to that, which is natural, because Havel was himself thinking, writing, about what to do in what he called a “post-totalitarian” situation. And in Havel’s own writings... I mean, he is not quite correct about this, I don’t think, but in his own writings from the period he talks about Eastern Europe and Western Europe, or the West, as being at various stages in this post-totalitarian situation, which I don’t think was actually quite correct, but in a way it makes a kind of sense. So, reading Havel in that time and place, in the United States in the late 1980s, was to draw his hyper-humanist lesson, and then to see Eastern Europe in a completely different way. Because he was precisely trying to write against that post-human world; he was trying to get away from abstractions, and to try to think not in terms of destruction but in terms of creation, not in terms of collectivities but in terms of individuals, not in terms of ideologies, but in terms of experiences. And so that was a kind of awakening, and as a young person one is very romantic, but it was a kind of romantic awakening to this life which was on the other side.

I am very consciously trying to answer this question truthfully and historically, and not to make me in the late 1980s when I was whatever, 18 or 19 years old, sound more sophisticated than I was. Because this is how it was: the Cold War had been this hard, brutal, unforgiving thing. And then it appeared that there were these thinkers, (not just Havel, but Havel was the most important), who gave one the sense that ‘Okay, wait – they have the humanities there; they have literature there, and the literature that they have, they are trying to apply it to daily life.’ Which, of course, is what Havel was doing *par excellence*. So that’s how I met Havel; I read Havel as a young university student, and then I was following Havel – as I think many people in the Anglo-Saxon world were doing – through the essays of Timothy Garton Ash in the late ‘80s. I read all of those very religiously, his essays in the *New York Review of Books*, which were later

collected. And then I read Havel as a college student, and I read Havel as a graduate student, and so as I became an East European historian, and as I myself emerged from this Cold War world, and as I started to think about who the thinkers were in Eastern Europe, which was going to end up being what I studied in my life, then Havel became someone slightly different. I started to understand him in terms of various traditions. So I met Havel, in translation, on the printed page, in the early 1980s.

LK: Back to what you said – did he surprise you by the way he wrote and the thoughts... Did they maybe seem, and I might exaggerate a little bit, from the point of view of the young, 18-year-old person, did he seem surprisingly Western to you? Or was it something completely new and there was a clear distinction, that you could see he was coming from this world somewhere in between – it's not the Soviet Union, and it's not the West?

TS: I don't think I would have understood what "western" was at that point. I visited the Czech Republic for the first time in 1991, and one's first impression when one visits Bohemia, even then, is that this is very western; it looks western. But I didn't have that impression with Havel at all, I wasn't thinking in those categories. So, first of all, Havel represented at that time, and still does, a phenomenon which we don't really have, which is the phenomenon of the intelligentsia, so the person who is not doing his job (his job was to be a playwright), but the person who was writing in order to describe and change the world. The person who has two tracks in his life, at least two tracks; the professional part, and then the moral vocation. That is not a phenomenon that we really have, and immediately that was something one noticed with Havel, or with Michnik or with other people, that they belonged to this phenomenon. Right, and as I learned more about East European history, I came to see that as a tradition, but even when I was reading Havel for the first time, that was part of the romance of Havel – that he belongs to this group that

we don't have. The writing did not seem western, I mean, it was because... I mean I didn't recognize this at the time – but it came out of a philosophical tradition which I would not at the time have called western.

LK: Before we go to what was for you, or what is for you, the most important part of Havel's work, let's go back to how you met him personally, if you can just recall the situation, and maybe the impression... How much had you personally been shaped by what you had read and what you had imagined of Havel, as opposed to the situation where you actually met him?

TS: I don't think of Havel on his own, really. I think of him as part of various milieux, you know. And there are people in that milieu who I know better, or I know worse, but I don't think of Havel as being... You know, much as I admire him, I don't think of him as this figure whose face is carved into Mount Rushmore, and then everyone else is on the ground. You know, there are plenty of other Czechs or Slovaks who really were his friends, right – and that's, I guess, the point; there are people on the outside who admire him, like me, and some of them even came to know him a little bit. But I think that Havel existed only in that milieu, and so you asked when I met Havel, and I'm just going to say that I only met Havel because I spent time with other Czechs and Slovaks who really were his friends, right? And I think that that milieu is really important. So I actually met Havel in Bratislava, it must have been 2013, at the conference that the Šimečkova... Martin Šimečka ran...

LK: ...So he died in December 2011, so it must have been before, so 2010, maybe?

TS: Sorry, I am getting my own timeline confused. Yeah, it must have been 2010, at the meeting in Bratislava, yeah. That would have been the one time that I actually exchanged words with him and was in close proximity to him, because my panel was right after his panel. And then the people were at a bar together afterwards and I exchanged a few words with him. But I have to

say the way that he was in person was very much the way that I expected him to be, because he is characterized by this kind of massive humility, even his writing is very humble. I mean, at the moment it is courageous – he is addressing himself to Husák and that’s courageous, or he is making bold arguments, and in that sense courageous – but he is always very humble about his own talents and, in that sense, you don’t really expect him to be an overbearing personality, and he’s not. I mean, if anything his problem in public life (I’m sure you’ll ask about this later), his problem in public life was that he was so much himself, so very withdrawn. And the way he commented on himself as president, the way he commented on his own writings, the way he commented on life in general remained, I think, consistently withdrawn and, in a way I think, overly humble.

So I mean he was a man... I was glad to meet him, and I was glad to talk to him, but he was a man who I preferred to listen really hard to, because I think that he was weighing every word in a world where people were becoming worse and worse listeners. That’s in a way my impression of Havel. And of course by that time in his life, by the time that actually I met him... There’s a way in which Havel was sort of overwhelmed by the world towards the end of his life. I saw him a bunch of times, and I always sort of hesitated to actually impose myself on him, because I thought ‘There’s so much being imposed on him all the time!’ That’s kind of the feeling I had about him in the last years of his life, that I was almost happier if he could be on a stage and I could just listen. Because if he was on a stage, that means that nobody else was bothering him, you know, he’d actually have a minute to compose himself and say what he wanted to say.

Chapter II: Havel as Playwright/Writer – Articulating Responsibility, 00:11:51

LK: So, for you, I know it is always hard to set some sort of hierarchy, but when you think about his works and what you read and where you listened to him, what was the most inspiring work or moment for you?

TS: I mean, there are different kinds of moments. I think for me as a very young person, it was crucial that he chose to get involved in politics, like in politics in the normal sense, that he allowed himself to be elected president in Czechoslovakia in 1990, that he allowed himself to take part in that change of system from November '89 to January 1990. I mean for me as a romantic young person, you know, that notion of “Havel na hrad” [“Havel to the Castle”], that was a kind of crystallization of everything one hoped would happen. Like, here was the intellectual that one had admired, because by then... Even by 1989, I had been reading him, at least in English, for several years; this person that one had admired was now actually going to take power. And so that was this perfect crystallization of this transformation, of going from this Europe which was black and threatening to this Europe which was more... I mean this was all romance, remember! I know it didn't turn out this way, but this Europe which was black and threatening to this Europe which was more humanist than one's own Europe, because when was a playwright actually elected president of the United States or even of France? It hasn't happened! So this notion of going from this thing that was very threatening to this thing that was in some ways superior. There was this fantastic leap. You know, this moment where the Communist Party chooses to dissolve itself, this promise that there can be this rapid transformation, which of course was not fulfilled in Czech politics or Czech society, as we know very well. But that was extremely important that he chose to take responsibility, and not just him, I mean people around him too, like Jiří Dienstbier, you know, people around him... I have funny

stories about Dienstbier in 1992, if we can talk about that?

LK: We can, of course!

TS: Okay, so actually I met Dienstbier in a serious way long, long before I met Havel, because I was in charge of... I was working for a think tank and we were organizing a conference in Washington, D.C. in 1990, and Dienstbier came as foreign minister. And that was a moment where the contact between the romance of dissidence and the realities of actual politics became clear to me. Because, for one thing, it was my job to get him to meetings on time, and it didn't occur to me that this would be a problem, because in America everyone is on time for everything, and you know, you put on your suit, you put on your tie, and you show up, you're on time. And Dienstbier had meetings with the vice president, and with the secretary of state, and with the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, and it was all very exciting – you know the foreign minister of the newly sovereign Czechoslovakia – and we couldn't get to meetings on time. We just couldn't! He had to stop and have a cigarette, he just didn't understand that you have to be... And all these things came later, of course, I mean everybody westernized and normalized and got better suits and better glasses and stopped smoking and got better teeth. That all happened, but at that moment he was still in that old world. So, I think we were half an hour late for the vice president or something crazy like this, and I was 20 years old and I didn't know what to say, like 'I'm sorry I couldn't get my guy to the White House on time!'

And then the other thing I remembered about him along the same lines was the smoking, because even by then, you couldn't smoke everywhere in America, you couldn't smoke inside every...

And he just could not stop himself, and I could not stop him either. And that was a confrontation, where you see physically how one rhythm of life is different from another rhythm of life. I understand that these people worked extremely hard in their way, and that is different from the

sort of hyper-Protestant, bureaucratized American rhythm of the day, where you get up and you follow a schedule and, you know, you kind of do what you're told. And how it is almost biological, like your whole body works differently. You have to have that smoke, you have to have that smoke, you know? And that's more important than seeing the vice president, or whatever it might be.

LK: And did you try to tell him, did you try to talk about it?

TS: I desperately was trying to explain this to him, yes! I was desperately trying to explain this to him. But it didn't have any effect.

LK: So when we go back to, later on, Havel and his writing and his works, which one has left the most profound...

TS: Oh, I'm sorry.

LK: Don't apologize!

TS: So I was trying to answer... That moment where he accepted responsibility was very dramatic, and in retrospect I also think was very important. And even because in many respects it was a failure, it is still very important, because you have to take responsibility sometimes for things you can't do. I think that is part of Havel's legacy. He in many ways was not a great president, but he stopped other people from being worse presidents. And there are moments that come where you have to take responsibility for things that you are not perfect for, and he knew that. I think he knew that, at least in his writings. He wrote a very nice eulogy of Gorbachev, or not a eulogy, but he wrote a description of Gorbachev as Gorbachev was losing power, and it was like he was describing himself; this is a person who has to be here, but he is not actually perfect, and you can see how it's... The job is weighing him down. So in retrospect... At the time it was inspiring, and in retrospect to me it is touching that he took responsibility for being

president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, even though it wasn't a perfect job for him.

LK: So in what ways do you think he wasn't perfect, or he wasn't fitting, for the role?

TS: He wasn't... That's simple. He wasn't a fighter in that sense. He was willing to try to say the truth about a system, and he was willing to go to prison for that. Because the thing about writing, especially if you are Havel, and you write well – you are setting out, if you write to Husák, I mean, it is very courageous to me – but you are setting out this perfect monument also. It is not just that you are resisting, or you are telling the truth; you are also leaving behind this perfect monument, the essay itself, which is going to be read decades later. But political fighting is not like that, if you have to fight with Václav Klaus every day, it doesn't involve this aesthetic perfection, it is no longer an aesthetic activity. It is a brute, sociological, contingent, you know, ugly kind of activity, and he wasn't... I mean I'm not an expert on Czech politics, but he was consistently outplayed to my mind, unfortunately, by Václav Klaus.

But when I say he wasn't suited for the job, I don't just mean that he consistently lost political battles, I mean that he was unhappy about it. He was unhappy that that had to be his job. The speechwriting part of the job he was absolutely wonderful at. But I still haven't answered your question. I mean, we are still on this first part about... The essay, I mean, I have a very stereotypical answer, which is the essay I return to all the time is *The Power of the Powerless*. I taught it at Yale when I came to Yale in 2001. When I wrote the little book on tyranny about America's present predicament, that is the essay that I cite at length. And every time I read it, it seems fresh. And, I mean, that is an essay... I've been reading that essay since it was translated, I must have read it a dozen times, and that is the thing which has the most durable effect.

In going back to your earlier question, those principles are clearly quite universal. So after 9/11, after the terrorist attack in the United States, which is when I started teaching here, I was

teaching a Pakistani student in a seminar about *The Power of the Powerless* and she said ‘Yes, that’s just like my parents’ (her Muslim parents) ‘that’s just how they have to wear American lapel pins.’ She immediately made the connection - correctly, in my view. And that lapel pin, the idea, the pressure to do that thing, which makes you do whatever everyone else is doing, or the fear of taking it off precisely, those are indeed universal lessons. And we’ll get to this, I’m sure, but the notion that authoritarianism is a cooperative process, and that the line between ruler and ruled runs down the middle of each person. Those are arguments which one has occasion to use all the time. So that’s the second part. The willingness to take responsibility, even though it was an imperfect situation, and *The Power of the Powerless*. Yeah.

Chapter III: Dissident, Politician, President – Taking Personal Responsibility for Everyone Else, 00:21:29

LK: So when you look at his roles, and he had plenty of them – he was a writer, he was a dissident, he was a person who was jailed, and then later on he became a president and politician – which one of those for you is a role in which Václav Havel was most himself?

TS: So you are talking to someone who did not know him well, and it is a judgment from the outside, but I think friend and essayist – friend and essayist. Because, to take *The Power of the Powerless*, that was an essay which was written after talking to a bunch of Poles who were, you know, of similar mind, which is something that I really love to imagine, because when Poles and Czechs talk to each other, they always have the impression that they understand each other, and you know it’s [Laughter] actually so-so – but I think they were drinking, and that helps. But it was, that essay arose after those contacts. And then that essay was dedicated, of course, to Patočka, and so you have... It is a writing which arises from human contact, it is a writing which arises from friendship, and the sort of intense friendship, the sort of intense feeling of friendship,

which I think only can arise when there are political pressures on friendship. So, I think of him as a friend and as a writer, that's how I think of him. I don't know if I am right, because remember in the 1970s, I was five years old, and these weren't my friends. But this is the impression that I get at a distance, and I really do think that his best writing, and the thing which is most enduring about him, is the writing of the '70s - the writing of the '70s, when he was starting from some... You know he generally started from some small experience like brewing beer, or whatever it may be, and worked his way up to these synthetic arguments about what daily life is like. That, I think, is his best work, that is what I think has been most influential, not just on me, but in general. I think that is what he will be remembered for. I should say the dramatic work, I just don't feel qualified to judge it. It might have all kinds of virtues which I am just not qualified to describe. It is the essayistic work which I think is going to be his landmark.

LK: When we look at *The Power of the Powerless*, you mentioned your student... Then he was describing the regime he knew, the system that he knew at the time, but of course we talked about the universal message which came out of it. Do you think he managed to detect a way in which the then-Czechoslovak regime worked which is still relevant today? Do you see analogies for what we are seeing in the world today?

TS: I think it is universal. I mean you can... One way to test it is to go back in time, and not just forward. So he is making these kind of arguments in the 1970s, but you can also go back to the 1930s and you can see similar examples. So, in 1938, when Austria ceases to exist, there is this very interesting moment where suddenly everyone on the streets is wearing swastikas on their lapel – not just Nazis, but people who weren't, probably the majority of people who were suddenly wearing these swastikas on their lapels were not Nazis, or they hadn't been Nazis the day before. Why are they wearing the lapel pin, does it express their internal convictions? No, or

at least not yet; I mean, they might come to have those convictions later on. This might be part of that process. But it is not there to express their convictions, it is there to shield them from the consequences of this change.

And in the very special case of Austria in March of 1938, there are people who can't protect themselves in that way, and those people are the Jews. And so when you put the lapel pin on, you are saying 'I am going to join this larger community of silence, or of oppression,' and in that way you are indirectly taking part in the exclusion of this other community. So there is a semiotics to that which, as a historian, I think I understood better having read Havel. So, I am going to answer your question, but I just want to point out that if it is universal, or if describes something about modern, mass society in a way – [how] in mass society we come together in these sort of temporary, self-protecting, political communities – then it also works backwards, and not just forwards, right? The argument could apply itself to situations that Havel never thought about. So with today, yeah, I think it fairly obviously applies to the United States right now. But it applies to western societies generally. Here I think he was absolutely right when he said that... At the time, I didn't agree with him, and I still think he is a little bit wrong about technology, but he is right about the tendency of mass societies to form themselves up into these self-protecting, half-political communities, where you express a certain political view semiotically, you know with a sign, in order to protect this thing that we call private life from the important things that are going on. And, in doing so, take part in an existing regime or, to take the case of the contemporary United States, you take part in the regime change as it is going on. So yes, I think it is absolutely relevant, and I mean one practical test that it provides is that you simply have to ask 'What signs are people using?' What Havel says is that nothing in public life is innocent – just ask! That sign that says 'Workers of the World Unite,' don't ignore it even though, in some

sense, it is meant to be ignored. Notice it precisely because you are not supposed to notice it, and think about what it really means sociologically, not literally, but sociologically. And that's a really... It's simple, but that's a very valuable method. So when I watch sports on television, which I do, when I can, I look at the lapel pins with the American flags and I think 'What does that mean exactly?' Or what does it mean that the president of the United States – not this one, but the last one – what does it mean that Barack Obama was not powerful enough to take off his own lapel pin? Which he wasn't. He wore it for a while, and then he said 'I'm taking it off.' But he couldn't, he had to put it back on. The president of the United States actually could not take the 'Workers of the World Unite' sign out of his own shop window! What does that tell us?

LK: What do you think that tells us?

TS: I think it tells us, in my own vocabulary, that patriotism is always at war with nationalism and usually losing. In our society, the quick and easy route to saying that you are in and other people are out... You know, the quick and easy route of waving the flag or having the lapel pin always has an advantage over the people who say, 'No, to be American, or to be part of a society is what you do, and not what you post.' That's what I think it means. And President Obama is a special case, because of course he is a black man, and so it is so easy to say 'Oh that person'... It is so easy to say that person is on the outside. He was forced in some ways to be hyper conformist in his appearance.

LK: Do you see any new signs, and now we are jumping a little bit ahead, but do you see any new 'Workers of the World Unite' signs with the Trump administration, and with the new political divisions?

TS: They are working on it, but they haven't figured it out yet. So what Havel was describing was post-ideological. The signs, the 'Workers of the World Unite,' once meant something but

now means nothing. So you have the detritus of the ideology to work with, and it loses meaning slowly. And in that way the United States is different, because they don't have an ideology, a familiar ideology around them which is dying, and they can't protect themselves with its bones. In that way it is different. There is no system, there is no ideological system. So I don't... The closest, I guess the closest I would say would be the flag, the question of what the flag means. We are at risk of the flag becoming a symbol of the leader, as opposed to a symbol of the country as a whole, which is why I tend to think people on the left, or people who are protesting and so on, should also use the flag to make the argument that the nation is a society, as opposed to the nation is the leader. But we are at risk of that. But they haven't really worked out their own ideological language yet. It is interesting how they experiment; they talk about 'enemies of the people,' for example, which is a Stalinist phrase, but they don't have a fully-blown language yet.

LK: Back to Havel and *The Power of the Powerless*: there is one moment, which I found also very interesting – he is describing, in his eyes, a misleading moment in terms of how the West understands the totalitarian regimes in the East. He says that very often those are put together [conflated] just with one person and not with the system as such. Do you agree on this?

TS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

LK: And again, are there any analogies today – for example with how the US sees Russia, as this one person, who is Vladimir Putin, and not as this system of power and how it is organized?

TS: Well, with Russia, that has always been an American problem. We always see Russia as a mystery with a leader. And then the American hope is always 'Well, there'll be another leader and then things will be okay.' And of course after Mr. Putin things are likely to be worse than they are now. And I think your point is very well taken, precisely what America needed to understand and didn't in time is that Russia is an alternative way. Russia isn't just... I think if

Americans didn't just say Putin, they would say 'Oh, it's like a failed transition.' And that is exactly wrong. Russia is not a failure to become like us, Russia is just a success in becoming something else. And that something else has its own logic, and that logic can be humanly attractive, it can be exportable, and in fact it has been exported. Partly because there are themes, conservative or right-wing themes, which people in the Czech Republic or in Middle America might find attractive, and partly because Russia has quite consciously exported itself by trying to weaken other people's democratic systems. I think we made a huge mistake in not understanding that, and not understanding that there are other logics of politics. So I think your point is extremely well taken. And it was true of communism, but at least with communism we knew that there were texts, and we knew that there was supposed to be a system, and we knew that we were supposed to be paying attention to the central committee and the politburo and not just the leader. So, if anything, we've probably gotten a little bit worse. But yes, Havel's point is exactly right. In a general way, if you only look at the leader, you are preventing yourself from understanding the thing which you need to understand which is how daily life is altered so that there can be a leader, as opposed to a president... Which is one way of phrasing the American problem, do we still have a president, or do we already have a boss, or a supreme commander, or a head of a junta, or whatever you want to call it? At what point do you no longer have elected officials, and do you start to have leaders? That is one way of defining the regime change that is underway in the US now. So yeah, that's a point of Havel's which I think we were very careful to overlook.

LK: Even maybe in Central Eastern Europe I think we relate to leaders in exactly the same way, and when we describe a country very often, it is to describe the person on the top – so Hungary is now referred to as the country of Viktor Orbán, Russia is the country of Vladimir Putin, and

there is not the understanding that it is a system. This goes back to another of Havel's points that there is a system consisting of all these people who have their own responsibility and, unknowingly even sometimes, they are part of the system...

TS: I completely agree with that; it is like politics as dessert. You know, all you do is you eat dessert. You have presidential elections every four years or every six years, and it is just like you eat dessert – you don't have the meal, and you don't exercise, you just eat dessert, and that's the easy thing. You think 'Who's the leader?' and that's the shortcut to everything else. And you're right, it means that you don't feel like you have to be responsible. In the US one certainly sees this, and it's another good description of where the United States is right now, because people think 'Okay, well, he's the president, therefore what can I do?' And then people start with all kinds of normalizing (to use a very valuable Czech word). I mean, people start with all sorts of personal *normalizace*; they think 'Well okay, he's president and therefore it's legitimate,' or 'He's president and therefore that's the will of the people,' or 'He's president and therefore what can I do?' So you move from a contingent fact that somebody won an election to moral conclusions about how to behave without even noticing that you've done so. And people always do this, in America it's much more important now because we have a leader who wants to be an authoritarian ruler. But you're right that one sees it all over the place, and it goes back to the irony of Havel himself becoming president and how one understands that. Because for him personally it was about taking responsibility in an imperfect situation, but for Czechs, you know, there was the danger of 'Aha! Now things are different because one person is at the top!' You know 'Masaryk is back! Now we have the right person at the top, and everything is going to change!' And in Czech society things strikingly didn't change. I mean, forgive me for putting it like that, you know – the '90s and the *tuneláři* and then the return of pretty widespread popular

authoritarian attitudes about politics.

LK: How do you understand that? Why do you think it happened and, to ask a double question, did Havel play any part in it?

TS: No, I certainly wouldn't go that far. I wouldn't go that far. The first thing... I think it's very important that there be civil society before 1989, and that civil society, just for historical reasons, because of the rhythm of history in Czechoslovakia, because of the Prague Spring and the normalization that followed, the thing called civil society in Czechoslovakia [operated] as an idea... Whereas in Poland it was a thing – it was an imperfect thing, but it was a thing – millions of people had been involved in this organization called Solidarity, and that meant that when the system changed you could have more far-reaching and painful reform in Poland than you could in Czechoslovakia. That's part of it, not that everything turns out well in Poland either but...

LK: But there was something to build on?

TS: Yeah... But at least in Poland some kind of change was possible. The second thing is, I think, and this is really a matter for Czechs and Slovaks and my intuitions might be totally wrong, but I think the break-up of Czechoslovakia was a disaster. Because it was on both sides a kind of substitute for reform, because Václav Klaus argues 'As soon as we get rid of those lazy Slovaks, then we'll be able to be our European selves,' which means you don't have to ask the question of what Czechs actually have to do to be their European selves. And of course the whole notion that Czechs were more European than Slovaks I think turned out to be completely ridiculous with time. And for Slovakia as well, you know Mečiar can say 'Well, as soon as we get rid of the Czech oppression and exploitation, then we will return to our whatever'... And that just blocks the whole question of what you really should be doing. So, personally I thought the break-up of Czechoslovakia was a disaster for that reason; it allowed people to be asking the

wrong questions for that critical period of '90, '91, '92. In that really critical period, people were talking about the wrong things. The prime ministers were doing the wrong things at that time.

LK: Do you think that was intentional, when you look back at it, that they avoided this whole discussion of new identity and the values we should stand for?

TS: Yes. Absolutely. I think it was completely intentional. With Klaus it is hard to say what was short-sightedness, and what was just self-interestedness, and what was malice – you know, I don't know. But yeah, I think it was a way of avoiding the real question, which is how you do become European? Because when you say (I mean this is about the Czechs and not the Slovaks), but when you say 'The reason I'm not European is because those people are holding me back,' you're putting all the responsibility on the other people. You're saying 'It's their fault.' And of course it turns out, and again you'll have to forgive me that these are my very distant impressions, that the Czech Republic without Slovakia turns out to be a much less interesting place than it was before, and a much less cosmopolitan place than it was before, and a much less Habsburg place, if you want, than it had been before. So you lose the Habsburg monarchy and then you lose – lose is maybe the wrong word... The Germans are expelled, the Jews are murdered in the Holocaust, most of them, and then you lose Slovakia, and you are left with just yourself, and it turns out that that is not actually historical progress. It turns out that history isn't just a matter of dispensing with everyone else so that you can show how wonderful you are, you dispense of everyone else and all that you gain from that is the lack of excuses.

LK: So what you are describing goes back to precisely what Havel was naming, which was responsibility, and the [capacity] to admit that you are a part of the system, and you have to self-reflect to understand that. So to blame politicians or to blame someone else for 'Oh, they are that and hence I am not this,' or, the other way around, to draw identity from that, there's a lack of

reflection and a lack of responsibility...

TS: Yeah, that is what I was trying to say about the tragedy of him becoming president. Because for him personally, he's taking responsibility, but in a way it looks like he is making the choice for everyone else. He then becomes this figurehead. I'm remembering these posters from right then with a picture of Masaryk next to a picture of Havel, which for me was just a little bit too much like the picture of Marx and the picture of Lenin! Like 'Okay, and now the man has come and now things are going to change.' And, of course, it was completely understandable that Czechs were happy about this, but the tragedy is that Havel can only become president in order to tell everyone else to take responsibility. And that's just a very hard and almost contradictory message. I'm friendly with a really wonderful young man – not that young – Slava Vakarchuk, who is a Ukrainian rock singer, he is the lead singer of the biggest Ukrainian rock band. And not so differently from Czechoslovakia in the '70s, music can be quite political; he's the most popular person in the country. If he wanted to be president, he could be president. He would win. But the question is: should he do it? And he reads Havel, and he is in exactly the same philosophical position where, whenever he speaks to Ukrainians he tries to convince them 'Look, yes, the system is corrupt, but we are all in the system, and everyone needs to take responsibility for a little bit of the thing.' And he is extremely charismatic and well-spoken and intelligent, and he can say this in English, and he can say it in Ukrainian, and he can say it in Russian, and I've seen him do it. And then whenever he is done, someone raises their hand and says 'Well, Mr. Vakarchuk, when are you going to run for president?' And that is like the whole point has been missed! The whole point has been missed.

LK: Do you think this whole quality – if we can call it that – this rock-star quality, and Havel certainly had it... Abroad he was well-regarded and everyone loved him, and everybody wanted

to be around him when he traveled; do you think this is something that can be successful in foreign policy as opposed to domestic policy?

TS: Well, people wanted to be Havel. I mean, so that generation that knew about Havel, the people who were roughly his age who cared about ideas, the people who wrote in places like *The New Republic*, they wanted to be Havel. And you can't be Havel in America, it is impossible to be Havel in America, because it is too easy. You know, you can write whatever you want, if you have an essay about *Dasein* you can write it wherever you want. You can't be Havel in America. But they wanted to be Havel. And the musicians also wanted to be Havel - I mean the artists wanted to be Havel, because Havel brought together the things that are impossible to bring together in the West, to be the artist and the writer and the president. And of course, you know, all these people who are essayists, they would love to be the philosopher king too. And he actually was the philosopher king. So it's true that people wanted to be with Havel, because they wanted to be Havel. But whether that was foreign policy or not, I'm a little bit less sure about that. I think it is the word 'policy' - you know in Czech, it is just one word, 'policy' and 'politics.' There I think we started to have some problems. Because I don't think Havel was politically surefooted when it came to the actual America, or the actual Britain, or actual western countries. I think, maybe this is something you want to ask about later, I think he got drawn into our politics in ways he didn't fully understand.

LK: You think so, that was the case?

TS: Oh, yeah. I'm utterly convinced of it. I think that he tended to think that the people who admired him were the good guys. Which wasn't... I mean some of us who admired him were maybe the good guys, but they weren't all the good guys. And I think he got pulled a little bit too far into this confusion of the United States... This conflation of the United States with liberty.

So, I mean, if any analysis of freedom is true, if his analysis of freedom is true, it has to be critical vis-a-vis everyone, including us. And I think he was not that critical. I mean, I just don't think he understood the United States, which is perfectly understandable that he did not understand the United States – why would he understand the United States? But I think he got drawn in by the people who found him sympathetic towards some things, you know, like the Iraq war, towards some things which I think he was just a bit out of his depth about. And I think... And I would put it more strongly: I think we abused him a little bit. I don't, when I look back... I mean I had nothing to do with it, right – I wasn't a politician and I didn't know him – but I think we should have been a little bit gentler with him. I think it was a little bit too easy to instrumentalize people like him and like Adam Michnik, who were just working their way out into the West, and it turns out that the West isn't... That there isn't "a West." There are a bunch of countries which have complicated domestic political systems, and the intellectuals may have commitments that one doesn't quite understand fully because it is not your country. The things that you would understand right away in your country, you don't understand in someone else's country. So yeah, I think he got dragged... This is about foreign policy: I don't think he was very surefooted in foreign policy. I think he set a good example. I mean I think he set an admirable example. And there were people who wished to follow that example, and I think all in all, certainly, his presence was a positive one. But as we moved away from 1989 into historical questions of what liberty means outside of Europe or can you deliver liberty by force of arms, I think he was a bit out of his depth.

LK: Well a very important part of his message, and even his foreign policy, was the emphasis on human rights. When you look at that do you think the concept has changed over the years, how we look at it, and in what form they should be part of foreign policy?

TS: So, let me answer that the easy way, and then I'm going to try the hard way. The easy way is: I think we've learned from experience the difference between supporting civil society on the one hand and regime change on the other. So the experience, the way that communism came to an end in 1989 had nothing, or almost nothing, to do with direct American or British or western action. We weren't actually doing very much and, I remember this very distinctly because, as I say, I was working for think tanks that did foreign policy at the time, the American political elite was scared. The American political elite thought that things were going too quickly. The American political elite was afraid that the Soviet Union was going to invade after all, despite Gorbachev. The main thing that Americans were concerned about, the everyday, number one concern in 1989 and 1990, was 'Is Gorbachev happy? Is Gorbachev going to stay in power?' That's what we were concerned about, we weren't really concerned about... I mean, we liked it! I don't want to overstate this, we liked that Poland and Hungary and Czechoslovakia were changing governments, we celebrated that. But we were also afraid of it. We were also afraid of it. My point is we didn't actually push to make it happen. It happened, and we had something to do with it in the sense that people in Eastern Europe saw us as an example. We had something to do with it in the sense that governments in Eastern Europe owed us money. We mattered. But we weren't pushing for that kind of change. And the arguments for change were made from the inside and not by us, right?

I mean, sure, Reagan stood in Berlin and said 'Tear down this wall, Mr. Gorbachev.' But the arguments about what a better society would be like in Czechoslovakia or Poland or Hungary were being made by Czechoslovaks, Poles and Hungarians, not by us. So I'm calling that civil society, right? The idea that it makes sense to support illegal publication or it makes sense to talk about human rights, or it makes sense to, if someone is in prison, it makes sense to talk about

their imprisonment as an injustice. That's what I mean by civil society. Without the immediate hope, and without the knowledge that this is going to lead to some kind of change, but you do it for its own sake. And then the political argument is, if things do change at some point, it is better to have a civil society when they change. That's one set of policies which is more like Brzezinski or Carter, or even Reagan.

And then there is another set of policies which says 'No. Forget about the thinkers and the civil society. You can just start with the government and change the government and everything will be fine,' which was the crazy utopian optimism of the invasion of Iraq. And the tragic thing is that Americans "learned" this lesson from this. Because Americans "remembered" that what had happened was that they had done this, when in fact they hadn't done this. They hadn't done this. East Europeans had done this. And so the idea that solidarity is a reason for invading Iraq is a kind of political tragedy for us. It is our misunderstanding, it is our hubris, right? It is the pride before a fall. And Havel and Michnik's tragedy, and the tragedy of many East European intellectuals is that they kind of got dragged along from this to this as people. But where I am going with this is the idea of human rights. So that's the easy answer – that, as policy, I think it makes sense to support human rights, but that invading a country isn't the same thing as supporting human rights.

That's easy – here comes the hard part: human rights in an East European context is an argument that comes from within, right? It's an argument that is made from within. And going back to the way we started the conversation, the way Havel talked about human rights, or the way Havel talked about individuality, was more interesting than the way that we were talking about individuality. And so the notion of human rights themselves, or the notion of a civil society itself, is coming from inside – not that all Czechs shared it or anything like that, but the idea is

coming from the inside. And so there is no sense in which an outside world is imposing it artificially – it is there. And this is the hard question, I think. I think it is easy to say in Poland in the 1980s, or in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, yes, if you are President Reagan or President Carter you talk about human rights, because that is an idea which we are learning from you, rather than the other way around. It is coming out from Moscow and Kiev and Prague, it is not being sent in from Berkeley or New York or Washington. So the idea goes both ways, the conversation is recognizable at both ends. The harder question is when you use human rights and there's not an interlocutor at the other end, when it is a foreign concept. I think that's the harder question, because there you have to say, 'Human rights is going to have to be a guide for me. For what I'm going to do in my own foreign policy.' And that's, I think, how you have to think about it. You have to think 'Okay, I can't do this because of what we stand for.' But you can't be sure how supporting human rights is going to affect the other side, it may not go the way that you think.

LK: Do you think that Havel was thinking like this when, for example, he was supporting human rights in Cuba and other places, Burma?

TS: Thinking like what?

LK: What you just described. For Havel, human rights were a very universal message, so from his whole experience, he would have probably understood the very local moments of the everyday struggle for basic dignity and the human right to feel your own responsibility and be part of a society which you wanted. So how does his concept of human rights during his presidency, then, and the human rights applied in foreign policy... Where do you see his own input?

TS: Well, historically, he was extremely important, and I personally think that it is a reasonable

way to pursue foreign policy. I think that it is a positive legacy. I'm trying to say the difficulty only arises when you don't actually have a conversation partner at the other end. Like, in Cuba and Burma, you do. When Havel or when... I guess the last time Schwarzenberg tried to go to Cuba he got kicked out, but when you go to these places, you literally have people to talk to. Burma and Cuba are actually famous examples of places you can go and there are dissidents and you share a common language. And for someone like Havel, I think that's actually very important. You can say it is universal, but he didn't in general talk about countries where he didn't know anybody, where there weren't other famous dissidents, or other people... Even people he didn't know, [but] he knew somebody who knew them. And that's actually very important, that human rights became an international conversation, in a way, personally, by way of people... You know somebody who knows somebody. There's a kind of pantheon. So I personally think it makes sense, if human rights are at the center of the way you see the world, it makes perfect sense to have a foreign policy on that basis. All I'm trying to stress is, if that is the case, you have to behave consistently with that, because you can't expect the other side to have any idea what you are talking about, necessarily.

Right – if you are going to do it, you have to be in a world where... This is perfectly consistent with Havel, and I think that I agree with you – but you have to realize you are in a world where a) the other government may not have any idea what you are talking about or b) sincerely believe that what you are doing is a form of cultural imperialism. You have to be aware that it is not just that they are faking it. They just might actually truly, sincerely believe that what you are doing is a form of cultural imperialism. I mean, I think Russians today – not all of them, I mean, not my friends, but quite a large percentage of the Russian elite sincerely believes that if we talk about human rights, we're just engaging in a certain refined form of cultural imperialism which is

designed to undo their system.

Chapter IV: Legacy – A Guide to the Rules of Resistance, 00:57:25

LK: When you look then at Havel and his legacy here, when we talk about the US, maybe we should not talk in abstractions but about simpler things, what would you like for example young students who don't know him, or young kids, to know about Václav Havel and why he was important?

TS: Havel is maybe the best guide back to dissident thought in general, and the most accessible one. So I think *The Power of the Powerless* is actually the best gateway back into a whole world of thought, a whole anti-totalitarian, let's call it, world of thought. And it is particularly good for Americans, precisely because he wasn't American and he is writing from everyday experience – that makes it more plausible. If you're asking what young people could learn from it, I think, that resistance is thoughtful, right? And that thoughtfulness is a kind of resistance. And this is a tough one for American kids, because people realize that they should be doing something, but the American notion of doing something is like [*clicks*]... Like this! I mean, in America, you are either following the rules and being good, or you are rebelling. It's one or the other. The idea that there would be rules to resistance, or that resistance has to be thoughtful, you know, that's a tough one for us. And that's Havel's central problem, that's his central problem. And it is coming from someone who both resisted and paid a price, and who was clearly a first-rate thinker. So that might be the most useful thing for young people.

LK: You put together the 20-point scenario for resistance. Was Havel, you mention him, an inspiration for this as well?

TS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I couldn't have done it... I literally could not have done it without Havel. The book, the 20 lessons, I could do because I'm a historian, but I could also because I have

some sense... I mean I wrote that book in five days, so I could do it because I have some sense of what happened in Nazi Germany, or Fascist Italy, or the Soviet Union. But I could also do it because these people, Havel among them, were my teachers. In some cases literally my teachers, but in some cases people I read and admired – friends of friends, people I was close to indirectly. Because I feel like I understood what they were trying to argue and could transmit it quickly. So, yes, the book is absolutely an attempt to transmit what I take to be some of Havel's central points. But it is also an attempt, going back to your last question, to put young people today who don't know what to read back in touch with, one hates to use the word but, you know, the "classics." To put them in touch with traditions, with thinkers, with liveliness, which they might otherwise not know.

LK: How do you personally understand what is happening, and what has been happening, not just in America but around the world? Where do you see the reasons for the rise of populism and nationalism and these forms of very animistic approach to the world, if I may say so?

TS: Yeah, if you give me a hundred years, I could write you a good book about it. But you know, I have four little answers. One is generational, that people don't know what the alternatives mean. If you look at popular opinion polls, both European and American young people are much more authoritarian than their parents, like not in the sense that they necessarily walk down the street with torches, but they want more guidance and they're not sure what democracy is good for. I mean, one of the things that democracy is really good for, as Winston Churchill is supposed to have said, it's really good at not being something else. So a democracy is really good at keeping out the other things. And the other things are all worse. But no one knows that anymore. I mean, even in Eastern Europe, it's like that moment in Czechoslovakia where you realize 'Oh! I've just met a Slovak who doesn't really understand Czech!' Or 'I've

just met a Czech who doesn't really understand Slovak.' Like, that moment where you realize that something has changed. East European young people, unless they have made a special effort, are not particularly connected, unless their parents have made a special effort, they are not particularly connected to the history of communism. And so they have become European in the bad sense of having no history. And Americans also of course have no history, in the sense of reflective history. So part of it is generational, in the sense that people just don't know what they are playing with. I think people think 'We can keep all the stuff we like, but we can also have that sense of national solidarity, and we can also have the pleasure of excluding the outsider, and we can also have a glorification of our own past.' People think 'We can get that, and we can also have freedom of travel, and prosperity, and freedom of speech.' They don't realize that those things don't really go together. Another point is technology, that new technologies are problematic. You know, we like books now, but for a hundred years, books made people kill each other over what for us would be arcane religious differences. We like radio, but Hitler liked radio too. I mean people who listen to radio now, at least in this country, are generally very peaceful. You know, the lovers of Mozart that listen to radio are usually calm citizens. But, you know, Hitler and Goebbels wanted there to be a radio in every German household, and they had a reason for it, because at the beginning, radio could be used for fascism. And the same thing is happening with the internet, you know, the internet has the potential to be everything that people say it is going to be, but it turns out that, on balance, at least in the last five years, it's definitely been a force for a reaction, rather than for progress. And we're only now beginning to understand psychologically or even neurologically how the internet creates communities, and how it alters behavior in so-called real life – that's number two.

Number three, which can be overrated, but which is nonetheless important, is that populism now

has a champion. So, if you want to ask ‘Why was there French communism, and why was there Italian communism?’ it wouldn’t be sufficient to say ‘There was a Soviet Union,’ but that’s part of it. And likewise, if you want to ask ‘Why is there a Trump?’ or ‘Why is there a Le Pen?’ That’s not caused by Putin and the Kremlin, but they are in the mix somewhere, they are sponsoring it somewhere. They are a second-tier factor. They are part of it. There is a champion for this, it is somehow organized, it has its own media empire and so on. That matters a lot. And then what else? And then also inequality. I’ll now make a really old-fashioned, even Marxist, argument: even though globalization, if you take an average, generally, has led to more prosperity, there are parts of Europe and parts of America where it hasn’t, and where people think that their chances for social advance are lower, and those people tend to vote the way that they vote. So, those are my stabs at it. I also think that there’s been a certain amount of bad luck. I think if the weather had been different on the day of the Brexit vote, or if the FBI director hadn’t released those emails a week before the election, you know, I think we’d be in a different world. I mean, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by three million votes. You know, it took really bad luck for three million votes not to translate into her being president. And if she were president, we would now be talking about how the tide towards populism had been reversed and how the Americans are so progressive and so on and so forth.

LK: Thank you, and may I have one last question?

TS: Okay, one more! [*Laughs*]

LK: It also goes to a) Havel and b) to what you write in those 20 points. One, if I’m not wrong, is to live truthfully, and to live in truth. My question to it is, you mentioned new technology and there is this whole discussion of the “post-truth” world, is it even possible to live in truth when we consider the fact that society is so divided that people simply don’t understand what the truth

is in the same way anymore?

TS: This is one place where Havel really helps me. Not just Havel but also people like Viktor Klemperer, who is writing about Germany in the '30s. Even when it seems impossible, you should still do it, for your own sake. The whole business of living in truth has two sides. You should be virtuous for its own sake – not that Havel was virtuous in every way, of course. But you should be honest for its own sake, and then maybe it will have some consequence. But you're not... I mean, philosophically, this is the great ambiguity of all of this. You should live in truth because that is the authentic, correct way to live, but then maybe politically it might have some consequence – maybe. But that's not why you are doing it, says Havel. You're doing it in order to be yourself. You're doing it in order to be yourself. But I would say, in order for there to be democracy, in order for there to be citizens, each person has to try to be himself or herself. That's a precondition to the whole business. So it can't hurt.

I don't think it is all so desperate. I like to think we are living in the age of pre-truth – that the truth is still somewhere out there in front of us and we might eventually get there, right? I think that “post-truth,” although I use the term too, I think it is a little bit dramatic – because post-truth suggests the truth is over, it's behind. I don't think so. I still think there is an awful lot of truth in front of us. But someone like Havel helps us to navigate this. So if we compare, America in 2017 when it comes to the truth is pretty depressing, but it is not as depressing as Czechoslovakia in 1977. It's not. It's different. There are different techniques, different lies, but it is not as depressing as Czechoslovakia. You know, you tell me, but I don't think it is as difficult as Czechoslovakia in 1978. And so, if Havel can make the case in *The Power of the Powerless* in 1977, if Havel can make the case in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, that you should live in truth, then I think Americans can do the same now. I don't think that is so demanding.

LK: Thank you!