

The perpetuation of automatism in the private sphere

Many people acknowledge that their life follows a monotonous cycle that tirelessly repeats itself day after day. They become fully immersed in this daily routine that eventually drags them into the endless repetition of their actions. This automatic reiteration of the daily reality brings these people closer to the concept of *automatons* – self-operating machines that follow a predetermined sequence of operations. Vaclav Havel, a recognized Czech writer and later politician, wrote a comprehensive essay in 1978 called *The Power of the Powerless*. In this essay, among other topics, he explores the concept of automatism that reigned over “the post-totalitarian system,” which is the name he uses to describe Czechoslovakia during its communist period. Havel explains which traits of this unprecedented system allowed it to manipulate its citizens through the power of ideology – citizens that became blind automatons. Nonetheless, Havel also warns us that this tragic reality of the post-totalitarian system should concern all of us, because as he puts it, “the automatism of the post totalitarian system is merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological civilization” (71). Havel then argues that democracies are not the ideal form of government, for its citizens also behave like manipulated automats.

Havel goes one step further and suggests that in order to eradicate the automatism that prevails over both the post-totalitarian system and Western democracies we should strive to achieve a *post-democratic system* – a system characterized by the existence of little communities that would allow us to restore our civic responsibility and moral values. Havel sees the post-democratic system as the only way to put an end to our automatism and believes that in such a system we would become truly independent and conscious members of the polis. However, doubt can be cast upon such confident expectations of the post-democratic system. From *The Power of the Powerless* we infer two different levels in which automatism acts upon: the private sphere and the public sphere. We argue that while Havel’s post-democratic system does address the problematic of automatism in the public sphere, he does not take into consideration the automatism of the private sphere that would thus still prevail in this civically-engaged society.

As aforementioned, the vast majority of Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless* analyzes the characteristics of the post-totalitarian system. The existence of this system relies on the automatism that prevails in both the system and the people. As Havel explains, "the automatic operation of a power structure thus dehumanized and made anonymous is a feature of the fundamental automatism of this system" (13). He emphasizes the importance and potential of this automatic behavior, since it is precisely what allows the system to keep on controlling its citizens: "experience has taught us again and again that this automatism is far more powerful than the will of any individual" (13). Eventually, "[the individual] will be compelled to resign this individuality gradually, once again blending with the automatism and becoming its servant, almost indistinguishable from those who preceded him and those who will follow" (13). Thus, people surrender their human identity for the identity of the system and become blind automats. This last quote also shows how Havel places a negative connotation on automatism: individuals are *forced* to give up their personal selves and become the *servants* of the system, and thus they have no other option but to be absorbed by the system. Moreover, this automatism is not evident to the eyes of people who live in the system and they do not recognize themselves as servants. Havel explains this with the story of a greengrocer who always puts the sign "Workers of the world, unite!" in his store without realizing it, simply because it is part of the "general panorama" (15).

However, later in his essay Havel argues that this automatism that controls people's actions is not only present in the post-totalitarian system, but also in all Western democracies: "traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and the industrial-consumer society for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it" (71). As it can be noticed in these quotes, Havel keeps referring to the concepts of consumerism and technology throughout his text. The Czech writer universalizes his observations from the citizens of Czechoslovakia to all human beings in democratic societies and suggests that the post-totalitarian system is in fact a gray caricature of modern life.

At first sight it might seem paradoxical that a democracy, which is a political system that allegedly provides us with freedom of thinking and action, is simultaneously controlling our actions through the same automatism that prevails over the post-totalitarian system. Havel also addresses this apparent contradiction: “in a democracy, human beings may enjoy many personal freedoms and securities that are unknown to us [the members of the post-totalitarian system], but in the end they do them no good, for they too are ultimately victims of the same automatism, and are incapable [...] to become proud and responsible members of the polis, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny” (72). This last quote is very significant because it highlights how Havel establishes a link between the concept of automatism and the relationship between the citizens and their state. This means that automatism does not only affect our everyday actions but also the way we politically engage with our community. The word *polis* is especially meaningful because it refers not only to the state *per se* but rather to a state in which there exists a civic debate. Havel recurrently refers to the word *genuine* to describe his ideal political system. The concept of *genuine* appears in opposition to the artificial nature that he identifies in the post-totalitarian system.

Therefore, from Havel’s description of automatism we can distinguish two levels upon which automatism acts: first, it affects our daily routine-based actions, and so it determines our most basic behavior – buying a certain shirt that we saw advertised, talking in a particular way, constantly checking our phone, etc. This corresponds to the private sphere of life – the one in which the government and the institutions have no direct effect. However, automatism also affects us on a second level, in which it does not allow us to become truly responsible members of the state we live in. Automatism obfuscates our critical thinking and prevents us from becoming civically engaged. This corresponds to the public sphere of life – the one in which individuals gather and take political action. The private sphere affects our social life, whereas the public sphere affects our political life. Hence the first level affects the relationship between humans; the second level affects the relationship between humans and their state.

But which factors influence this first level of automatism, the ones that determine our daily behavior and thinking? If we examine Havel's examples, he places an enormous importance on money and consumerism. Havel analyzes the relevance of money in our everyday life and claims that we find ourselves under the "dictatorship of consumption," in which we are seduced by the consumer value system and our identity is thus dissolved in mass civilization. Havel keeps referring to both the post-totalitarian system and democracies as "consumer" societies, which are subjugated by the "omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture" (71). It is quite visible in our society how money triggers a persistent desire to consume and an aspiration towards economic growth. The second factor that Havel identifies as a cause for our automatism is technology. He does not give much detail about how technology is actually an alienating component of current societies, but he argues that technology is "out of humanity's control, has ceased to serve us, has enslaved us and compelled us to participate in the preparation of our own destruction" (69), and he also mentions that technology has deprived us from self-control and has torn us away from our natural affiliations. Havel asserts that technology has dispossessed us of control over our own actions and future. Again, he emphasizes the positive connotation of everything that is *natural* and *authentic* to humans. In fact, these are the three factors that Havel believes the post-totalitarian system and Western democracies have in common: consumerism, technology, and automatism.

Later in his essay, Havel proposes a solution that would supposedly eradicate the automatism that prevails in both the post-totalitarian system and Western democracies – he advocates for the creation of a "post-democratic system". Such a system would help restore our civic awareness and self-identity, which would allow a "rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love" (73). The main characteristic of the post-democratic system is the existence of "open, dynamic, and small" (73) organizations, without any accumulation of power, and that would create true communities. Havel hopes to have "organizations springing up ad hoc, infused with enthusiasm for a particular purpose and disappearing when that purpose has been achieved" (73). Such structures would arise from an

“authentic social self-organization” (74) and would follow the principle of self-management. Eventually, the post-democratic system would achieve a “genuine participation of workers in economic decision making, leading to a feeling of genuine responsibility for their collective work” (74). As we previously identified, the most important adjectives Havel uses to describe the post-democratic system are *genuine* and *authentic*, as he thinks that the best political system is the one that is closer to the true aspirations and desires of people. These are what he calls the “essential aims of life” (17).

However, Havel’s solution of the post-democratic society only focuses on the second level that automatism acts upon – the level that concerns the civic participation of citizens in the public life of the state. Havel’s idea of small organizations that appear and disappear are intended to free people from a political automatism and instead provide them with a genuine interest to become active members of the polis. His idea of the post-democratic system indeed attempts to encourage people to make a genuine contribution to the destiny of their state. Havel attempts to create a system in which people *truly* decide the future of their state. Nonetheless, he does not address the first level of automatism, which would not be eradicated in the post-democratic system. Even if citizens become true members of the polis, automatism would still be present in the daily life and would inevitably predetermine people’s actions.

One might argue that if we solve the second level of automatism by creating a society where all citizens take responsibility the first level would also be resolved. But isn’t this precisely what democracy intends and – according to Havel – fails to accomplish? Democracies have more freedom in the public sphere than the post-totalitarian system, and yet Havel argues that humans still behave like automatons because of the power of consumerism and technology – that is, due to the first level of automatism. In the end this freedom in the political sphere does citizens no good because the private sphere still enchains them. Then, the post-democratic system is to democracies what democracies are to the post-totalitarian system: humans enjoy more freedom in the public sphere but the veil of automatism in the private sphere prevails.

Moreover, Havel does not refer to consumerism or technology when explaining the post-democratic system – how would the automatism created by these in the post-totalitarian system and democracies be eradicated by only promoting a higher civic engagement? Having small and dynamic organizations would not prevent people from being enslaved by money and technology. Nevertheless, the idea of the post-democratic society is indeed valuable and should not be forgotten. First, it addresses and potentially frees humans from the second level of automatism. Second, it guides our path to a better society in which we maximize our freedom within its impenetrable limits.

In conclusion, Havel's *The Power of the Powerless* explores the automatism that prevails over both the post-totalitarian system and traditional democracies. We make a distinction between two levels upon which automatism acts: the level that controls our daily routinely actions (the private sphere) and the level that determines our civic engagement in the political life of our state (the public sphere). While Havel's idea of the post-democratic system does address this second level of automatism, he neglects the automatism that would prevail in the private life. However, we should not forget the importance of the idea of the post-democratic system as we strive to achieve a society with more freedom, rights, and justice.