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Havel Deserves Better: Promises and Failures of a Political Biography

John Keane. *Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. 532 pp.

Anthony Kamas

The new biography of Vaclav Havel written by John Keane, *Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, is indeed a tragedy; however, it is difficult to say where the tragedy lies. John Keane is currently a Professor of Politics at the University of Westminster and the Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy. Contrary to Keane's previous characterizations of Havel, this biography creates the image of a calculating politician driven to near demise by his lust for political power and strong women. It seems that by framing his narrative in such a way, Keane has done violence to the spirit of freedom and humanism that has energized Vaclav Havel throughout his life. The text marks a departure for Keane; his current treatment of Havel, and the "civil society" he helped create to counter the Czechoslovak regime's oppressive controls on human freedom, is quite different in his 1998 publication *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*. It was, therefore, a disheartening surprise to find that Keane has chosen to haunt the image of Havel with what seems to be the ghost of a Machiavellian prince.

This is the Havel one meets on the pages of Keane's text; his entire book is designed to convey the steady progression of a *political animal*¹ that was *destined to be king*.² The author's position is best expressed in his opening characterization of Havel

Vaclav Havel suffered the misfortune of being born into the twentieth century, that his fate was politics, that by any standards of

1. Keane uses the term *political animal* constantly, but does not make explicit what he means. The term originates in Aristotle's *Politics*, and is meant to illustrate that man (the greatest of all animals) is inherently a being of the polis- or of political association. Yet Keane seems to use the term in a way that suggests animalistic, predatory, and libidinal characteristics.
2. These are the types of metaphors that Keane continually uses throughout his narrative; they are both misleading and inaccurate.

reckoning he rose to become a flamboyant political animal who achieved fame by teaching the world more about the powerful and the powerless, power-grabbing, and power-sharing, than virtually any other of his twentieth century rivals.³

Keane uses this strange mix of fatalism and historical determinism to situate Havel at the head of an elite group of political figures that includes, among others, Adolf Hitler, Leonid Brezhnev, Nelson Mandela, and Bill Clinton.⁴ It is difficult, however, to say which is the greater fallacy—that Havel was fated to be “king” (a metaphor Keane abuses), or that Havel (along with Mandela and Clinton) can be placed in the company of Hitler. Yet what stands in stark contrast to this biography for anyone who has read about the history of Eastern Europe, is that the life of Vaclav Havel is an inseparable part of the struggle and triumph of freedom and human dignity over a terrifying political regime. What had become clear by the end of the biography is that the real tragedy in the text is its silence. Beneath the noise of the author’s theories of power and libidinal energy, there is the untold story of an ordinary man who, much like Albert Camus, believes in a “modest thoughtfulness which, without pretending to solve everything, will always be ready to give human meaning to everyday life.”⁵ A critical look into Keane’s text will help clarify some of the author’s flawed assertions and omissions that distorted the complexities of Havel’s life.

Beginning with a preliminary warning about the “true character” of Vaclav Havel in the preface, the author sets out to depict Havel as a budding prince from his first moments of life. Interlaced with an account that emphasized a child destined for greatness, is Keane’s interpretation of Machiavellian and Hobbesian thought to further mold the image of a child born into a politically brutal and calculating world. The reader is then given the impression that due to such political undercurrents, Havel naturally develops into a savvy, calculating, and charismatic *political animal* that quickly learns how to direct and manipulate those close to him. These character traits are, according to Keane, both natural and historically determined; Havel becomes the leader he was

3. Keane, 4.

4. Keane, 5.

5. Jeffrey Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 18.

always destined to be due to his irresistible fate, his unfortunate but fortuitous moment in history, and his innate ability to exploit both. Such characterizations are continually reinforced by Keane through conjecture that frames otherwise commendable acts of freedom and modest heroism as calculated decisions to incrementally capture power.⁶

This distortion is all too evident in Keane's descriptions of Havel's role in the organization of Charter 77. While commenting on an informal speech Havel gave to his Charter peers, Keane writes that "the Charter performance was good for his political career."⁷ What "political career" can Mr. Keane have in mind? It is ridiculous to assume that Havel acted as a dissenting member of society to secure himself a position in the communist political institutions, and it is equally absurd to think that Havel and the other Chartists created this group to secure their political prominence once communism fell. Although they hoped for it, no one expected the debacle of the regime—not in 1989, and certainly not in 1977; Charter 77 was a plea for human respect and an *antipolitical*⁸ movement that asked the regime to abide by its own laws regarding human rights. The Machiavellian fantasy that Keane pens could only make sense to a person who has no knowledge of Havel's historical context and has an active imagination.

And it is such an imagination that later carries the reader into those anxious days of the Velvet Revolution, and again places Havel in the center of an opportunistic struggle for power and control of "the opposition." Keane writes that Havel's "public quest to confirm his leadership- a show par excellence- began at the Prague theater Laterna Magika."⁹ Yet here, Keane found it more difficult to maintain his biographical project; the chaos of that moment in history does not easily give itself to a narrative of determinism. Keane attempts to maintain the image of Havel-as-political-animal, while noting the spirit of the moment. "Nothing was certain"

6. Which is, once again, difficult to believe given the social and political context of totalitarian and post-totalitarian society.

7. Keane, 247.

8. This, of course, does not mean that Charter 77 did not have a political character (broadly conceived).

9. Keane, 352. Timothy Garton Ash gives quite a different account of these events in his eyewitness account, *The Magic Lantern*.

Keane explains, “[b]ut a week into the revolution he had begun to look and act like the moral and political leader of the resistance to late-socialism.”¹⁰ This statement is important because it touches upon two central aspects of Havel and his life. The first is that, indeed, nothing was certain in a general sense, and it follows that nothing was ever certain in Havel’s life as well. But rather than extending this uncertainty to Havel’s entire existence, Keane attempts to limit it to the moment of the Velvet Revolution. The second point is drawn from Keane’s latter comment; Havel was not *the* moral and political leader of the revolution as Keane states, but *a* moral and political leader who gained the trust of people because he was a sincere opponent of the regime and *its* realpolitik political practices. These two neglected aspects of Havel’s life and character can be further illustrated to clarify the deficiencies of Keane’s text.

The notion that *nothing was certain* runs counter to the overall thrust of Keane’s story, and is an idea that delegitimizes its determinism. An alternative to Keane’s narrative that still places Havel amid the many social relationships that conditioned his life is expressed in Hannah Arendt’s theories on the human condition. She understood that a person’s life is continually created by a complex and chaotic world; contrary to Keane’s characterization of Havel’s destiny and his constant drive to realize it, Arendt’s work offers us a more plausible premise. For Arendt, the person who has chosen to consciously act does so within an “already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions,” and due to this ubiquitous and chaotic condition, specific actions hardly ever achieve their desired end.¹¹ Considering the regime that Havel lived under, it is extremely difficult to believe that Havel pursued his playwriting, activism, and essay writing, in the hopes of fulfilling his grand designs on postcommunist power. No, Havel did something else; within a society that forbade a person to be an individual with an opinion of his own, Havel acted and spoke with a voice that ran contrary to the party line and, therefore, forged a new individualistic identity. Through

10. Keane, 352.

11. Hannah Arendt, *On the Human Condition* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 184.

this rebellion, Havel regained the dynamic aspects of his humanity that were denied him by the ideological confines of the communist regime. The parallels between this phenomenon and some of Arendt's writings are worth noting; she wrote that "in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make an appearance in the human world."¹² While Keane does not emphasize this aspect of Havel's actions and refuses to consider him heroic,¹³ Arendt argues that "the connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own."¹⁴ It would not have been difficult for Keane to portray Havel as such a person.

By turning to the second notion pointed out above, Keane's ideas regarding Havel's hunger for power can be addressed. I previously disagreed with Keane's characterization of Havel as *the* moral and political leader of the opposition, and stated that he was, rather, *a* moral and political leader who participated in the leadership of an opposition movement.¹⁵ Contrary to what Keane would have the reader believe, Havel was and is not the stereotypical politician that most people today eye with cynicism and distrust. Keane claims that the pursuit of power was the underlying and guiding principle that led Havel to become the leader of the opposition. He further asserts that once Havel was *in power*, he used this ability to direct and control others, to hamper the growth of a democratic parliament, and to establish a "crowned republic" where he could reside as sovereign. The entire narrative is designed to construct a Machiavellian political universe in which the following assertion becomes legitimate: "Those who talked at the time of Havel as a 'reluctant president,' as a man who had been forced by events against his will into politics, missed the

12. Arendt, 179.

13. Keane, 11.

14. Arendt, 186.

15. I do not wish to imply that Havel was but one of many similarly apt dissidents. No, Keane is quite correct to point out Havel's special talents and abilities for writing, speaking, and inspiring others. His charisma is indubitable; yet one must be careful in drawing causal connections between these talents and actions and any notion of a master political plan or mysterious fate at work behind the scenes.

point: Havel had always been a political animal who knew well the art of directing others.”¹⁶

A more plausible understanding of these events and of Havel, however, lies somewhere in between Havel’s willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of his activism and the immediate need for someone to take on such responsibility. Havel was not forced by history or his destiny to become a leader during that critical time in Czechoslovakia. But one can imagine that he did feel the weight of the moment and the hope that hung in the balance between the old regime and an indeterminate future. What urged him to lead in that instance was not his ambition for power, but was that part of his character that *had* inspired him to act courageously in the past—he felt a responsibility to his own sense of human dignity and hoped to encourage others toward a more active role in public life.

The basis for such a contrary view of Havel is not difficult to ground; both Havel’s fellow activists and western scholars echo similar characterizations. Perhaps the comments of Adam Michnik, who shared a similar life under Polish communism, can fill some of the silence of Keane’s text. Writing just after the revolutions of 1989, Michnik recalls Havel’s actions and character throughout his life.

Judging by his biography, Havel has always been a man of political moderation. He never succumbed to the narcotic of Communist ideology, but neither did he shut himself up in a doctrinal anti-communism. The most precious values of Czechoslovak culture find expression in Havel’s writings— the love of freedom and respect for tradition, the humor and self-irony, the tolerance and unswayable integrity. He never resorted to anachronistic divisions of the left-right variety. In building the community of Charter 77, he was able to formulate his ideas in a new language that created a common ground for yesterday’s antagonists. On that ground, an anti-totalitarian community was painstakingly constructed, a democratic polis in the world of oppressive dictatorship.¹⁷

This “historical” Havel who so clearly contrasts with Keane’s mythological Havel can be found in the related writings of such

16. Keane, 381.

17. Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 148.

notable scholars as H. Gordon Skilling, Timothy Garton Ash, and Jeffrey Isaac. The enduring relevance of Havel as a political figure in postcommunist society is further clarified by yet another scholar, Vladimir Tismaneanu,

If these societies are to reinvent politics in a humane, enlightened way, such fundamental values as truth, trust, and tolerance need to be defended in the political arena. This is the reason Vaclav Havel decided to remain politically active, and urged like-minded intellectuals to do the same.¹⁸

It is sufficiently clear that Keane's narrow interpretation of Havel as an ambitious politician does not accurately reflect his character and activism; yet the question that remains is what kind of leader is Havel?

To gain some insight into the kind of leader that Havel was during the years of communist rule throughout today, we can consider the Arendtian notion of leadership¹⁹ as described by Jeffrey Isaac. Isaac explains that the context in which such initiative occurs is central for Arendt. In a description that closely resembles the *parallel polis*, Isaac tells us that Arendt argues in favor of "open, revisable, contestable, political associations and communities, for a flourishing of praxis, the human ability to intervene creatively, to disturb the normal flow of events, to create new forms of solidarity and new ways of being."²⁰ It was these types of political associations and communities that Havel and his like-minded friends created, beginning with the 36er's in his teen years, the cultural and artistic associations that followed, and later still, took form as Charter 77. It is noteworthy that these associations were not political in a narrow sense; they were not a part of the state, and operated according to quite a different notion of politics. In both Arendtian terms and in their existence under Czechoslovak socialism, these associations were arenas that made space for differing points of view and meaningful interaction between people, as they fostered an atmosphere of tolerance and compromise. Within such spaces Havel, as well as other notable dis-

18. Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation*. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 5.

19. This is very close to her notion of "action," elaborated in *The Human Condition*.

20. Isaac, 71.

senters, acted and “led” by example, which often manifested itself as individualist expression and participatory activities. Although Havel was indeed charismatic, intelligent, and eloquent, one is hard-pressed to find evidence indicating (except in Keane’s bio) that Havel was the realpolitik opportunist who sought to fulfill his monarchic destiny through such endeavors. Havel was a person who acted- he was but one individual in a group of *elites* that chose to express their dissent and took responsibility for such actions.

Isaac also points out that two principles help clarify the character of such *elites* and associations in Arendtian thought.

1. Arendt does not believe that this politics of elites can, will, or should completely supplant universal suffrage and representative governments so much as she hopes that it may energize and complement more “normal” forms of modern politics.
2. Arendt’s elites are not elites at all: they are accorded no special privilege; they draw their power from nothing other than their decision to act in concert with their fellows; they are completely self-selecting.²¹

It is this type of Arendtian elite that best approximates Havel’s activism and leadership. The fact that a still-communist parliament elected Havel to the presidency after the Velvet Revolution indicates that his position in government and politics was not a result of calculation, but rather had much to do with the regime’s loss of legitimacy and Havel’s proven sincerity and moral courage. Based on such qualities, Havel was trusted to wield presidential power in a thoughtful and cautious manner.

Yet Keane describes the events of 1989 in a different light; the Velvet Revolution is depicted as a scene in which “Havel the Prince” seizes power and his fated kingdom. Keane chooses the notion of a *modern revolution* to explicate Havel’s fated role in the events of 1989:

[T]he history of modern revolutions from the late eighteenth century onwards suggests that revolutions are never “the irruption of the masses in their own destiny” (Trotsky), for the simple reason that they always- the Velvet Revolution was no exception- unleash the lust for power among jostling minorities of organized manip-

21. Ibid.

ulators, who seek the ultimate prize: immense power over the lives of millions of others.²²

While Keane's assessment of modern revolutions may indeed be accurate, he is wrong to conflate the Velvet Revolution into the category of "modern revolution." The lack of violence and ideological program on the part of the "revolutionaries" signifies a crucial difference between the political upheavals in 1989 and those of 1789 in France or 1917 in Russia. Furthermore, the "manipulators" that existed or emerged during those chaotic months of late 1989 and 1990 may have been selfishly vying for power, but Havel was simply not such a person. Havel was neither the eloquent con artist, nor the political opportunist playing on people's fear and anger; one needs only to read Timothy Garton Ash's eyewitness account of Havel and the Velvet Revolution in *The Magic Lantern* to gain a contrasting perspective on these matters.

The tactics for modern revolution were unthinkable for the activists of 1989- the regime had a monopoly on violence, and it would have been impossible for the citizenry to overthrow it through armed conflict. While the underlying principle of a political revolution did still hold true in 1989,²³ the actual public effort followed a different revolutionary strategy that basically rebelled against all notions of politics and violence of the past. This was a revolution led by people like Havel who, somewhat paradoxically, worked hard to maintain a "rule of law" atmosphere while simultaneously trying to end the reign of the communist regime and liberate society. Throughout the negotiations and debacle of the communist regime, the Czechoslovak constitution was not suspended, nor were revolutionary courts established; rather, sweeping change surged from *the bottom up* and peacefully transformed the Czechoslovak socialist system into a vehicle of chaotic but progressively democratic change.²⁴ The Velvet Revolution was not, therefore, the typical modern revolution, and Havel was not the typical modern Jacobin or Marxist revolutionary.

There are, unfortunately, many more problems with Keane's bi-

22. Keane, 345.

23. Those in power can no longer rule by the established government, and those who are ruled refuse to abide by such a government.

24. Michnik, 232-33.

ography of Havel. This review only briefly explores the most notable fallacies that appear in the text. The author has done freedom and imagination no service through his neglect of the extraordinary aspects of this modest hero's struggles, activism, and sense of civic responsibility. While Keane is correct to point out that Havel was indeed at times all-too-human and often erred in his private life, one can take issue with the author's characterization of Havel's conduct within totalitarian and post-totalitarian society; portraying Havel as a *realpolitik* figure is quite problematic. Rather than a narrative of destiny and calculating ambition, Keane could have made more explicit the relationship between Havel's character and the passionate, undogmatic activism it sustained through the desolate totalitarian winter. I, therefore, think it best that Olga, Havel's first wife and longtime partner in life, have the last word on Havel in this debate over his biography (which is ironic since it is she who has passed away while Havel is still very much alive). Just prior to the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, Havel was arrested for his activism. In his defense, Olga stated that "[i]f Havel is sentenced, then all who stand by him in our country, and abroad, including those who have nominated him for the Nobel Prize, will be sentenced along with him."²⁵

25. Keane, 361.