

Learning to Speak Their Own Language:
Václav Havel

Mr. President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and to all those citizens of Cuba who are listening to us:

I am here in Florida for the first time in my life, and Florida is also the last state in the United States - and the last place on the whole American continent - that I will be visiting as President of my country. It was my own choice to come to Florida, and I have chosen it, among other things, because it is from here that I want to extend my greetings to all Cubans - both to those who live here, and to those who live at home, in Cuba.

Every modern, freedom-loving person feels, or at least ought to feel, a sense of solidarity both with those who are prevented from living in their home country or from freely visiting it, and with those who are forced to live in their country in a state of constant fear, and who cannot leave it and return to it of their own free will.

But there are people who should naturally feel this kind of solidarity far more intensively than others. I am referring to those of us who experienced first hand, on our own skins, as it were, the oppressive weight of life under a totalitarian system of the communist type, or who may even have tried to resist that system and, in doing so, experienced just how important the solidarity and help offered by people from freer countries was.

I think that one of the most diabolical instruments for subjugating some people and fooling others is the special Communist language. It is a language full of subterfuge, ideological jargon, meaningless phrases and stereotypical figures of speech. To people who have not seen through its mendacity or who have never had to live in a world manipulated by it, this language can appear very attractive. At the same time, in others, this very same language can evoke fear and horror and force them into permanent state of dissimulation.

In my country, too, entire generations of people once let themselves be led astray by this kind of language with its fine words about justice, peace and the necessity of fighting against those who, allegedly in the interests of evil foreign powers, resisted the power that spoke this language. The great advantage of this language lies in the fact that all its parts are firmly bound together in a closed system of dogmas that excludes anything that does not fit. Any idea with a hint of originality or independence - as well as any word that is not part of the official vocabulary - is labeled an ideological diversion - almost, it would seem, before anyone can express it. The web of dogmas deployed to justify any arbitrary action by the ruling power, therefore, usually takes a utopian form - that is, an artificial construct that contains a whole set of reasons why everything that does not fit the structure or that reaches beyond it must be suppressed, forbidden or destroyed for the sake of some happy future.

The easy thing to do is to accept this language, to believe in it or, at least, to adapt to it. It is very difficult to maintain one's own point of view, though common sense may tell you a hundred times over that you are right, as long as that means either revolting against the language of the powers-that-be, or simply refusing to use it. A system of persecutions, of bans, of informers, of compulsory elections, of spying on one's neighbors, of censorship and, ultimately, of concentration camps is hidden behind a veil of beautiful words that have utterly no shame in calling enslavement a "higher form of freedom," of calling independent thinking a way of "supporting imperialism," or labeling the entrepreneurial spirit a way of "impoverishing one's fellow humans" and calling human rights a "bourgeois fiction."

My country's experience was simple: when the internal crisis of the totalitarian system grows so deep that it becomes clear to everyone, and when an more and more people learn to

speaking their own language and rejecting the hollow, mendacious language of the powers that be, it means that freedom is remarkably close, if not directly within reach. All of a sudden, it seems that the king is naked and the mysterious radiant energy that comes from free speech and free actions turns out to be more powerful than the strongest army, police force, or party organization, stronger than the greatest power of a centrally directed and centrally devastated economy, or of the centrally controlled and centrally enslaved media, those chief propagators of the mendacious language of the official utopia.

Our world, as a whole, is not in the best of shape and the direction it is headed in may well be quite ambivalent. But this does not mean that we are permitted to give up on free and cultivated thinking and to replace it with a set of utopian clichés. That would not make the world a better place, it would only make it worse. On the contrary, it means that we must do more for our own freedom, and that of others.

May all Cubans live in freedom and enjoy independence and prosperity!

To all those who have not lost the will to resist arbitrary force and lies, may your dreams be fulfilled!

And may Oswaldo Payá Sardinias, the great champion of human rights in Cuba, be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and may this award strengthen the courage of all the Cuban people to take up non-violent resistance against an oppressive regime!

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