



Fall 2020

The Politics of Dissent: How Living Within the Truth Threatens Autocracy and Catalyzes Democratic Progress

Carter A. Hanson
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

[Share feedback](#) about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Hanson, Carter A., "The Politics of Dissent: How Living Within the Truth Threatens Autocracy and Catalyzes Democratic Progress" (2020). *Student Publications*. 892.
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/892

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link:
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/892

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

The Politics of Dissent: How Living Within the Truth Threatens Autocracy and Catalyzes Democratic Progress

Abstract

This article examines Václav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless* in the context of a broader ideation of dissent, primarily using Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and William Connolly's *The Fragility of Things* as supplements. Havel's argument remains relevant over thirty years after its initial publication, and his ideas regarding dissent as a fundamental challenge to authoritarian untruth are valuable and deserve further exploration. From this conceptualization, a "politics of dissent" is proposed as a means to express dissatisfaction with authoritarian government and to reevaluate democratic social and political discourse.

Keywords

dissent, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, role performance, democracy

Disciplines

Ethics and Political Philosophy | Philosophy | Political Theory

Comments

Written for PHIL 252: Social and Political Philosophy

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

The Politics of Dissent

**How *Living Within the Truth* Threatens Autocracy and Catalyzes
Democratic Progress**

Carter Hanson
Social and Political Philosophy
Professor Lisa Portmess
November 20, 2020

Introduction

Dissent is not simply a specialized mode of politics that is entered into cautiously and that, once destroyed by the state, has no political or social power; instead, dissent, like all actions, is political because it endangers the fragile and generally accepted norms of society and exposes the cracks and fissures in foundational political systems. What I mean by this is that dissent, as in the act of living within the truth, is the only way to actually *live*, and because all actions—whether in dissent or consent with the state—are ultimately political, any form of dissent holds substantial political and social power, and can catalyze untold waves of public adjustment. Ultimately, dissent has the capacity to pioneer new discoveries about social reality and can empower political possibility, and from this ever-expanding politics of dissent can emerge a rich pluralistic society.

This paper will be an investigation of dissent as an individual act of “living within the truth,”¹ as well as the effect of dissent on the macropolitical scale—primarily within totalitarian regimes, though also expanded into a more general concept of progressive politics. First, I will employ chapters from Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to answer these questions: What is totalitarianism? And what role do lies and pseudo-reality play in totalitarian regimes? Then, I will move on to the following questions: Is there a responsibility to dissent? What is the aim of dissent? And what power does dissent hold within a political community? To answer these questions as they pertain to authoritarian regimes, I will use sections from *The Power of the Powerless* by Vaclav Havel, and to broaden the political philosophy of dissent and apply it to contemporary American politics, I will use a chapter from *The Fragility of Things* by William Connolly entitled “Role Experimentation and Democratic Activism.”

¹ Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” *International Journal of Politics* (1979): 35, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf>.

Part I

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt outlines the preconditions for the emergence of the totalitarian state, primarily using the historical rise of Nazi Germany in the 1930s as a model. She argues that the single most important precondition is for the masses to be generally disillusioned with both the reality of their lives and reality (or truth) as a concept; the people must be willing to not believe their eyes and to believe (or, at least, go along with) an aspiring totalitarian who will tell them what they want to hear.² Truth, in short, must be completely irrelevant to the masses: “In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true.”³ Furthermore, mass disillusionment with truth emerges, Arendt argues, as a result of suffering and loneliness, which she describes as “the experience of not belonging to the world at all.”⁴ In power, totalitarians use this backdrop of pseudo-reality as “an organizational device,”⁵ and though some of the people may believe totalitarian conspiracies, and others may not, it ultimately does not matter as the masses act as if they have this belief, and this gives real power to totalitarian leaders.

Most politicians are primarily concerned with their own political preservation, and totalitarians are no different: in power, they concern themselves, above all, with annihilating the individual. Individuality is an expression of freedom, as it constitutes the freedom to define oneself. Freedom directly threatens totalitarianism because it allows constituents of the regime to operate within reality—that is, outside the totalitarian’s faux-reality. In effect, this has the

² Hannah Arendt, “The Totalitarian Movement,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism, Part 3* (San Diego: Harcourt Books, 1951), 80.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Ideology and Terror,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism, Part 3* (San Diego: Harcourt Books, 1951), 173.

⁵ Arendt, “The Totalitarian Movement,” 85.

potential to shatter the totalitarian illusion—to point out that the emperor has no clothes.⁶ To combat individuality, totalitarianism takes over the lives of the masses through ritual, ideology, and terror: “By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them... It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.”⁷

Vaclav Havel, in *The Power of the Powerless*, draws greatly from Arendt’s conceptualization of totalitarianism, particularly emphasizing the use of ideology by the totalitarian as a justification for the annihilation of the individual.⁸ Havel also reaffirms Arendt’s argument that untruth is at the heart of totalitarianism, stating that the regime “must falsify everything.”⁹

Havel’s strength in *The Power of the Powerless* is his use of the metaphysics of state-constitution in explaining the immense power of dissent. He argues that all states—not just democracies—have a kind of social contract, albeit the totalitarian contract being significantly one-sided. In totalitarian states, this contract is manifested in the compliance of the masses with the rituals—which I consider to be a combination of diktats and public acts according to those diktats, and shrouded by ideology—demanded by the state. The power of the state in the system, however, is only in the people complying, and the regime itself only has the power of brute strength propping up a totalitarian society; in short, compliance is lawcraft.¹⁰ As such, political systems are constituted only by the compliance of individuals: “By this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, are the system.”¹¹

⁶ Havel, 22.

⁷ Arendt, “Ideology and Terror,” 164.

⁸ Havel, 7.

⁹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰ Ibid, 15.

¹¹ Ibid, 9.

In order to ensure continued loyalty, totalitarians set up controlled decisions for citizens, forcing the people to constantly reaffirm the power of the regime.¹² Each of these confrontations, however, provides an opportunity for dissent. “Living within the truth,”¹³ as Havel describes dissent, is any act executed outside of the control of the totalitarian, as it threatens to reveal to others that the system is a lie. The totalitarian state can survive as long as nobody lives within the truth because “as long as appearance is not confronted with reality, it does not seem to be appearance.”¹⁴ But any foray into reality, however small and inconsequential, threatens to topple the entire illusion: “Every free expression of life indirectly threatens the posttotalitarian system politically.”¹⁵

Havel argues that dissent is an overtly political act because of its political power, but its catalyst is fundamentally private. People choose to live within the truth not because they have the lofty ambition of overthrowing the regime, but because their moral salvation depends on escaping the totalitarian world of untruth, and they cannot stomach the politics of lies. This somewhat optimistic view further manifests in his argument that dissent is spontaneous and occurs across the spectrum of life: “A ‘dissident’ is simply a physicist, a sociologist, a worker, a poet, individuals who are doing what they feel they must and, consequently, who find themselves in open conflict with the regime.”¹⁶

William Connolly in *The Fragility of Things* illustrates the emergence of a totalitarian pseudo-reality within contemporary American democracy, which he describes as the “resonance

¹² Ibid, 14.

¹³ Ibid, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹⁶ Ibid, 39.

machine.”¹⁷ This is a system between right-wing media and the people who consume that media, in which truth is irrelevant and the media tells the masses what they want to hear, forming *ressentiment* in the Nietzschean sense. In describing the “resonance machine,” Connolly makes relevant the politics of dissent to contemporary America, providing a critical bridge between totalitarianism and the pliable democratic masses.

Connolly’s conceptualization of society—democratic or otherwise—echoes Havel’s metaphysics in describing the implicit social contract that acts as an illusory bind between the masses and the state; Connolly expands this metaphysics, however, into the world of role performance, comparing Judith Butler’s philosophy of gender performance to the politics of dissent.¹⁸ Connolly argues that the roles we perform in society define us: “You are, in part, a composite of the roles in which you participate, even though you overflow the composite.”¹⁹ Dissent is a break with the set of roles that society recognizes and accepts, and, as such, it pushes the boundaries on what is conceived of as a potential politics—this expansion of the conceptualizable occurs across society and is not confined to dissenters. Role experimentation (as Connolly codes dissent), even at the most minute scale, has the power to redefine roles and norms, especially as a public act, which can translate micropolitics into macropolitics.²⁰

Connolly’s most effective argument is that politics, as with philosophy, is inescapable: “There is no zone of complete neutrality in a world of role performances.”²¹ Whether we desire to or not, the way we embody the roles we identify with is political, because it is a fundamentally public act; indeed, “Our lives are messages.”²² Realizing this truth, we can begin to embark on

¹⁷ William Connolly, “Role Experimentation and Democratic Activism,” in *The Fragility of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 180.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 183–184.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

²² *Ibid.*

the painstaking, life-long work of crafting those messages toward a positive objective—this is the politics of dissent. The politics of dissent is working to better understand the roles we embody and to improve them for the good of others—in a spirit, as Connolly puts it, of “existential gratitude.”²³

Part II

Dissent in the traditional sense is something slightly less violent than rebellion, emerging out of the oppression of dictatorial and totalitarian states. Sometimes it is used to describe popular organized opposition in democracies, with images of protests with people chanting and holding signs coming to mind. I, in agreement with Havel and Connolly, reject this description; instead, dissent is much more a way of living than an overtly political ritual. I also agree with Arendt and Havel’s argument that dissent is effective because it rejects the totalitarian premise that truth is irrelevant and an inconvenience; instead, politics must be grounded in the real world because the real world is the only world in which progress can occur—in which people’s lives can be improved.

Havel believed that dissent emerges solely out of a kind of love for truth felt spontaneously across society.²⁴ This is not the case: instead, dissent, though it is expressed only by those who desire to live within the truth, is always political, meaning that political calculation plays an essential role in the decision to dissent. Havel idealizes a scenario in which thousands suddenly decide to dissent and refuse one of the regime’s loyalty tests, with which citizens are confronted constantly. What he ignores in this scenario is both the very real cost of dissent and the extent to which role expectations are ingrained in the public psyche. Dissent requires an

²³ Ibid, 181.

²⁴ Havel, 39.

incredible amount of bravery and sacrifice, and by painting it as an easy-to-make decision, Havel forgets the power of the regime. That being said, dissent is effective precisely because it is so dangerous: it sends a message. The real power of dissent is that it confronts the regime with a disloyalty test: in the hierarchy of punishment for role experimentation, each rung is ultimately an individual, and the punishment of a dissident forces those individuals to reassess their relationship with the regime. To dissent is to envision and strive for a better reality, one within the realm of the truth but not yet realized. To dissent is to deliberately confront the system and society with the damage that living within a lie does. Every time someone dissents, the system must reassess its position on dissent, and each arrest that follows weakens the regime because fewer people can turn a blind eye to the fact that the regime is a lie, and that the people ultimately constitute the state. Dissent, therefore, is both a public act (meaning that its objective is entirely political, whether dissidents intend it to be or not) and a selfless one, as individual dissidents understand the punishment they will suffer for dissenting, and merely hope to pave the way for a reform they will not live to see.

Connolly's line of thinking in *The Fragility of Things*, though effective in translating dissent into an effective political strategy for contemporary America, falls short of crafting a politics of dissent, in which difference is perceived to be what it truly is: an opportunity. The closest he comes to a politics of dissent is what he calls the "creative resonance machine," in which role experimentation is amplified in the public sphere.²⁵ What he misses is the fact that there is already a conceptualization of a "creative resonance machine": democracy. The goal of democracy is to translate the policy and societal preferences of the masses into representation by policymakers. In a perfect democracy, according to this definition, role experimentation would be reflected in the ideas and objectives of representatives, once support for specific role revisions

²⁵ Connolly, 194.

reached a given threshold. Once seated, that representative would then advocate for policy change to reflect role experimentation, accelerating and aiding in the redefinition, rejection, or addition of that role on the micropolitical level.

In this conceptualization of the politics of dissent I reject the premise from both Havel and Connolly that significant policy change only goes from micropolitics to macropolitics; instead, it can go either way, with the macropolitical almost always driving change. To achieve the politics of dissent, the path forward is in systemic reform—reform primarily in the process of translation from micropolitical preference to macropolitical representation and power. In better aligning the masses and the democratic state, role experimentation can function as a process of democracy, ensuring that the “people” is ever-expanding and that individuals accumulate power in proportion to their due.

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. “The Totalitarian Movement” and “Ideology and Terror.” In *The Origins of Totalitarianism, Part 3*, 39–86 and 158–177. San Diego: Harcourt Books, 1951.
- Connolly, William. “Role Experimentation and Democratic Activism.” In *The Fragility of Things*, 179–195. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Coppins, McKay. “The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President.” *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/>.
- Havel, Vaclav. “The Power of the Powerless.” *International Journal of Politics* (1979): 1–80. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf>.
- Livingston, Alexander. “Power for the Powerless.” *The Journal of Politics* 82, no. 2 (April 2020): 700–713. <https://doi.org/10.1086/706982>.
- Remnick, David. “Vaclav Havel Takes a Bow.” *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2003. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/02/17/exit-havel>.
- Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017.