Europe at the Fin de Siècle

Václav Havel and Maximilian Schell: A Conversation

Schell: Do you believe that it will be possible, at least in Europe, to really open the borders and slowly get rid of all these formalities, customs, passport controls, and all that sort of thing? Is this within your power?

Havel: It is true that we here in our part of Europe, that is, postcommunist Europe, are faced with very contradictory processes. On one hand, all of these countries want to join the community of democratic nations as soon as possible, while, on the other, they are putting up new walls. One very simple explanation for this, as far as I am concerned, is that most of the people simply have not noticed that something of great historical significance has taken place. Perhaps I would compare it with the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. Here we experienced the fall of an artificially constructed world that was built up over decades, a world in which time stood still; indeed, a world in which history stood still. And that world existed in an area where there had never before been enough time or opportunity to find a national or state identity. We have always been oppressed here by the most diverse forms of apparatus. This built up throughout the course of our entire history, not just during the years of communism, and now, suddenly, everything has exploded, all of these problems. Some of the questions facing us today have their roots in the twelfth century. A very profound historical change has taken place, out of which have developed all of these often paradoxical and strange events which we are able to observe today taking place in this part of the world, the postcommunist world.

Schell: Could it be that it is a major problem for people to first learn how to cope with freedom? Is it possible to teach people how to deal with freedom?

Havel: You are absolutely right. We find ourselves in a state of shock as a result of this freedom to which we are unaccustomed. I have often compared this to being released from prison. I was in prison several times. Life inside a prison is planned for you, right down to the smallest detail. There is not the slightest room for making your own decisions. Once you get used to this condition, of being imprisoned for a long time, and then you are suddenly released, the long-awaited moment of freedom has arrived, that moment you had always looked forward to, and this sudden freedom sends you into a state of shock. You don't really know what you should do with this freedom. You have to make decisions from the time you get up in the morning until the time you go to bed at night. In the morning, you have to decide which trousers to wear and whether to take the train or the car or to walk; thousands of little decisions that put you un-
der all kinds of stress because you are no longer used to having to decide. I believe that all of those societies that have had to liberate themselves from totalitarian systems now find themselves in this condition. But that's not all. For the people in these societies, an entire system of supports and certainties came crashing down around them. And even if these certainties were foolish, they did represent a kind of hierarchy, or structure, that people were used to and in which they lived. Freedom compels people to erect a completely new system of values. Indeed, it compels them to build up a civil society, a democratic society. All of this is one of the keys to understanding, for example, extremist tendencies, the call for a strong government, for nationalism, xenophobia, and populism. All of these are recipes that people hope will quickly build a new system of values—even if these values are the wrong ones—simply some sort of values that will liberate them from this condition of shock.

SCHELL: Do you think that the idea of communism was originally a good idea, one that was only abused in practice, or do you believe it is an idea that cannot work from the word go?

HAVEL: I think that in the beginning there were good intentions behind this idea. I believe that in the beginning this idea comprised an interesting analysis of capitalism in the nineteenth century. But I am also of the opinion that this was wrong from the very beginning. I see here not only the failure of one utopia, of one particular ideology, but also the failure of a certain way of modern thinking. This form of thinking has its origins somewhere in the time of the Enlightenment, its predecessors in the Renaissance. It is the thinking of a proud man, a man who thinks he has understood everything; a man who believes he is in a position to plan an ideal world. It is the way of thinking of a man who believes that his intellect is smarter than life itself; cleverer than the laws of nature, the universe, the great mystery, the secret code of existence, and who thinks that the human brain is material organization in its most advanced form. This man, then, thinks up a type of plan for a wonderful world—a paradise on earth. But life constantly sends his plan haywire, which necessarily leads to a totalitarian system because everything that works against his plan must be conquered. And so it comes to pass that we can start with the idea of paradise and end up with concentration camps. The organization of human society is unthinkable without some sort of power structure. Power is necessary. I have never fought against the existence of power, but I believe that power must serve society, to the end of better organizing society. I see the state as a service industry, and the administration and policy of the state as a service for citizens, as a service for society, not as a goal in and of itself. If I work in the service of power, if I make use of some sort of instruments of power, then I do that not because I find it fun, but because it is an opportunity to serve my fellow citizens.

SCHELL: The most important thing for a politician is to reach the individual, the person. How do you go about this?

HAVEL: In our modern civilization we are in a strange way divided into two camps: those who consume and those who produce. We become parts of different machineries, and we are torn between these two aspects of our existence. And it seems to me that in this process, personality, which is what really matters, gets lost. I believe that a restoration of human personality, which is what this is about, is only possible when personality is not seen as the summit of creation, is not seen as the lord of all it surveys. This is why, for example, I don't like the word "environment," because it divides the world into us, we perfect and clever human beings, and what surrounds us. We can only save our environment, however, if we understand it as part of a system of which we are also a part. We should not view it as something to be saved just so we can breathe clean air again.

SCHELL: What are your thoughts on this: We have been talking about the year 2000 and about people who are just now being born. Will it not be their responsibility to change the world, as it is today ours to create the preconditions for that change?

HAVEL: I don't think it's right simply and categorically to maintain that young people are inexperienced and that we, therefore, shouldn't listen to them. It is true, to be sure, that many young people have a propensity to simplify things and not to recognize the interrelationships of things. They feel a sort of direct, unlimited responsibility for the world and are gullible when it comes to quick fixes and solutions. All of this is true, but I also believe that this youthful ethos is something that, in the best sense of the word, can influence the consciousness of society. I belong to a generation that gained its sense of self-awareness in the 1960s, a time that had an atmosphere all of its own. And we could debate ad nauseum every-