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The Powerless in Davos: Central European Motifs in Mark Carney's Speech

The speech delivered by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the Davos forum offered a contemporary interpretation of Václav Havel's thought, particularly as articulated in the essay *The Power of the Powerless*. In diagnosing changes in the global order, Carney drew on Havel's critique of life lived in pretense and conformity. From this perspective, the Canadian prime minister's address had not only a geopolitical dimension but also a moral one—it constituted a call for courage and responsibility on the part of societies and states, especially those of medium importance in the international arena.

Mark Carney's speech. On 20 January 2026, during the 56th World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered a speech entitled *Principled and Pragmatic: Canada's Path*, which became one of the most widely discussed addresses of this year's forum. From the outset, Carney advanced the thesis of a "rupture in the world order", emphasizing that the contemporary world is not merely undergoing a transitional phase of transformation but is experiencing a lasting break with the post-war order based on the rules of international cooperation. In his view, the era of dominance and leadership by hegemonic states is giving way to a reality of great-power rivalry, in which norms are increasingly displaced by the instrumental use of economic and political power.

In his address, Carney referred to Václav Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless* (*Moc bezmocných*, 1978), in which the Czech dissident analyzed the mechanisms that sustain totalitarian systems. Havel argued that such systems rely not only on violence, but also on everyday acquiescence and the reproduction of appearances—a point he illustrated with the metaphor of a shopkeeper who hangs the slogan "Workers of the world, unite!" in his shop window not out of conviction, but out of fear of the consequences.

Drawing on this example, Carney argued that many states continue to "play roles" consistent with the narrative of an order based on outdated rules, even though this order is today systematically violated or ignored by the major powers. In his assessment, political declarations and slogans increasingly diverge from reality. The reference to Havel was intended to challenge this peculiar dramaturgy of international politics and to underscore that without an honest naming of current geopolitical dynamics, states—especially those described as "middle powers"—will remain condemned to passive adaptation to the dictates of great powers.

The Canadian prime minister stressed that sustaining the illusion that the old rules still function and provide protection leads to a situation in which such states "are not sitting at the table, but are on the menu" of those who actually shape the global rules of the game. His speech was therefore a call for courage—both rhetorical and strategic—to speak truthfully about the condition of the contemporary world and to be guided by one's own values rather than by superficial conformity.

Carney's address thus had a dual character: on the one hand, it offered a diagnosis of the state of the international order, which—as the prime minister emphasized—"is not coming back"; on the other, it was an appeal to build a new coalition of middle powers, grounded in shared values, solidarity, and a realistic approach to geopolitical and economic challenges.

The reference to *The Power of the Powerless* gave Carney's speech a dimension extending beyond a current geopolitical diagnosis. The analogy he employed embedded contemporary international relations in a broader reflection on the mechanisms of power, conformity, and responsibility that lay at the core of Václav Havel's

thinking. In this sense, invoking Havel was not merely a rhetorical gesture, but a deliberate reference to a tradition of understanding politics as a sphere of moral choices and social consequences.

The legacy of Václav Havel. Havel—a playwright, dissident, and later president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic—consistently understood politics not as a technique of exercising power, but as a sphere of social responsibility in which truth, ethics, and human relationships play a central role. His political thought, expressed primarily in books and essays written under authoritarian conditions, combined reflection on totalitarianism with questions about society's capacity for self-determination and moral autonomy.

In the scholarly literature devoted to Havel¹, it is often emphasized that he perceived politics as the practical application of ethics in collective life. At the center of this conception lies the idea of so-called “non-political politics”—understood not as a rejection of rational decision-making or institutions, but as an attempt to root political action in individuals' responsibility toward the community. Politics, in this view, cannot be separated from the everyday attitudes of citizens, their willingness to speak the truth, and their readiness to bear the consequences of their choices. It is precisely this social dimension of Havel's thought—the conviction that the quality of public life depends on the moral condition of society—that constitutes the core of his intellectual legacy.

The fullest expression of this diagnosis is the essay *The Power of the Powerless*, cited by Carney, written in the context of communist Czechoslovakia, circulated in samizdat, and later published in English in 1985. The text is not merely an analysis of power structures in a totalitarian system, but above all a study of the social mechanisms of subordination that allow an oppressive order to endure. Havel shows that the system rests not only on violence, but on the widespread participation of citizens in sustaining its symbolic rituals and fictions. The central illustration of this logic is the metaphor of the shopkeeper who daily places an ideological slogan in his window despite not believing in it himself. He does so not out of conviction, but out of fear of the consequences. This seemingly banal gesture, replicated on a mass scale, becomes the foundation of “living within a lie,” which cements the system. Havel demonstrates, however, that refusing to participate in this ritual—even at the individual level—has a deeply social dimension: it undermines the prevailing symbolic order and opens a space of autonomy vis-à-vis power.

In this sense, Havel's reflection concerns not only mechanisms of domination, but above all the role of the individual as a social actor capable of initiating change through living in truth. It was precisely this element—the belief that political transformation begins with a change in social attitudes—that inspired later theories of civic resistance, civil society, and deliberative democracy. Havel rejected simplistic divisions and schematic interpretations of political reality, proposing instead a discourse grounded in moral and social categories such as truth, falsehood, responsibility, and solidarity. Concepts such as truth, manipulation, or opposition thus became for him not only tools of critique, but also elements of a strategy of civic emancipation rooted in everyday social experience.

It is worth noting that the final years of Havel's presidency were accompanied by a growing sense of fatigue. This stemmed from a series of decisions he took in both domestic and foreign policy. Another factor was also significant. As Aleksander Kaczorowski, the biographer of the first president of the Czech Republic, observes: “Havel's mistake was to cast himself in the role of an ethical arbiter, embodying noble principles and bringing them into the low world of politics from outside, from above. That is political kitsch” (own translation by the editor).²

Commentary. The fusion of morality and politics means that Václav Havel's thought is not merely a record of the Central and Eastern European experience of the Cold War era and the struggle against a classical totalitarian

¹ A. Kaczorowski, *Havel. Zemsta bezsilnych*, Wołowiec 2014; M. Bankowicz, *Václav Havel: Non-political Politician*, „Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne” 2014, nr 6, pp. 33-48, <https://doi.org/10.14746/pss.2014.6.2>; K. Maj, *Centra semantyczne w eseju „Moc bezmocnych” Václava Havla*, Kraków 2016.

² A. Kaczorowski, op. cit., p. 415.

system. The Czech dissident's reflection transcends a specific historical moment and becomes a universal account of the mechanisms shaping the political life of communities, regardless of regime or era. Havel shows that political crises do not arise solely at the level of state institutions, but have their roots in the social sphere: in the erosion of social trust, in acquiescence to the language of pretense, and in individuals' withdrawal from responsibility for the shared public space.

From this perspective, Havel's diagnosis remains particularly relevant in situations of mounting authoritarian pressure, erosion of democratic norms, and the instrumental use of institutions of power. Havel draws attention to the fact that power consolidates itself not only through violence or formal rules, but above all through social consent to lies, opportunism, and symbolic rituals that replace genuine debate and responsibility. Democracy then loses its substance, even if its external forms are preserved.

The social and ethical dimension of Havel's thought therefore allows it to be treated as a tool for analyzing contemporary crises of democracy, understood not so much as sudden systemic breakdowns, but as long-term processes of disintegration in the relationship between the individual, society, and power. Havel reminds us that the quality of political life depends on the everyday attitudes of citizens—on their willingness to speak the truth, to resist manipulation, and to participate actively in the public sphere. It is precisely at this level, rather than exclusively within state institutions, that the durability or erosion of democratic communities is ultimately decided.