Václav Havel, Postmodernism, and Modernity: The Implications for Adult Education in the West

By Derek Briton and Donovan Plumb
University of Alberta, Edmonton

Abstract: This paper investigates the possibilities open to adult educators who reject the modern impulse to systematize and unify. Against popular opinion, we argue that not all postmodern options are bleak. We offer as an example a positive postmodern alternative advanced by Czechoslovakian President/playwright Václav Havel.

> Man [sic] must in some way come to his senses. He [sic] must extricate himself from this terrible involvement in both the obvious and the hidden mechanisms of totality, from consumption to repression, from advertising to manipulation through television. He [sic] must rebel against his role as a helpless cog in the gigantic and enormous machinery hurtling God knows where. (Havel, 1990, p. 11)

In this paper, we consider postmodernists to be those among us who reject the modern impulse to systematize and universalize. We believe such individuals or alliances of individuals are attracted to postmodernism because

> Postmodernism challenges global, all-encompassing world views, be they political, religious or social..., reduces Marxism, Christianity, fascism, Stalinism, capitalism, liberal democracy, secular humanism, feminism, Islam, and modern science to the same order and dismisses them all as logocentric, transcendental totalizing meta-narratives that anticipate all questions and provide pre-determined answers. (Rosenau, 1992, p. 6)

Consequently, postmodern adult-educators are those who are suspicious of the moral claims, traditions, and institutional norms of modern adult-education systems. They do not view the modern practice of adult education as a movement of liberation; they view it, rather, as a source of subjugation and oppression. While practitioners of modern adult-education seek to reduce the complex to the simple, predetermine objectives and outcomes, and construct standardized systems; postmodern adult-educators celebrate complexity, welcome indeterminacy, and respect differences.

The disparate and fragmented nature of postmodernism, however, has lead many to conclude its outcome is inevitably bleak, resulting in relativism, at best; nihilism, at worst. But postmodern positions are many and varied, and the rejection of "global, all-encompassing world views" need not entail despair and cynicism. This is particularly important for socially conscious, postmodern adult-educators.

The failure of the East's totalizing system—the grand Soviet, socialist project—has caused some socially conscious adult-educators to look to postmodernism to provide nontotalizing alternatives to the totalizing system they feel threatens the West—post-industrial capitalism. Consequently, postmodernism must offer these educators more than cynicism and despair if it is to be the basis of a credible critique of the homogenizing, new world-order championed by supporters of the right. It is our contention that such postmodern alternatives do exist, and that one such alternative is advanced by Czechoslovakian President/playwright, Václav Havel.

Following Rosenau (1992), Lash (1990), Agger (1990), Foster (1989), Gitlin (1989), Griffin (1988), and Graff (1979), it is our contention that while postmodernism is multi-faceted, its many variants fall into two broad categories. Rosenau (1992) labels the first of these "skeptical" postmodernism. This category includes many of those postmodernists who have won notoriety in recent years, for instance, Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Deleuze. This "is the dark side of post-modernism, the post-modernism of despair, the post-modernism that speaks of the immediacy of death, the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth, and the abrogation of the Order of Representation" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 15. Postmodernists of this persuasion argue the following:

> that the destructive character of modernity makes the post-modern age one of 'radical, unsurpassable uncertainty'..., characterized by all that is grim, cruel, alienating, hopeless, tired, and ambiguous. In this period no social or political 'project' is worthy of commitment. Ahead lies overpopulation, genocide, atomic, destruction, the apocalypse, environmental devastation, the explosion of the sun and the end of the solar system in 4.5 billion years, the death of the universe through entropy. Even where there is room for happiness, farce, parody, pleasure, 'joyous affirmation'..., these are only temporary, empty meaningless forms of gaiety that mark a period of waiting for catastrophe.... If, as skeptics claim, there is no truth, then all that is left, is the play of words and meaning.(p. 15)

For confirmation of Rosenau's account of skeptical postmodernism, one need look no further than Derrida's (1984) infamous account of the end of modernity:

> It is not only the end of this here but also and first of that there, the end of history, the end of the class struggle, the end of philosophy, the death of God, the end of religions, the end of Christianity and morals... the end of the subject, the end of man, the end of the West, the end of Oedipus, the end of the earth, Apocalypse Now, I tell you, in the cataclysm, the fire, the blood, the fundamental earthquake, the napalm descending from the skies by helicopter, like prostitutes and also the end of literature, the end of painting, art is a thing of the past, the end of the past, the end of psychoanalysis, the end of the university, the end of phallocentrism and phallogocentrism and I don't know what else.

It is little wonder that theatrical renditions such as this have focused the concern of many on the bleaker aspects of postmodernism. Fortunately, Rosenau's (1992) second category of "affirmative" postmodernism includes variants of postmodernism that are more optimistic.

Rosenau points out that while affirmative post-modernists "agree with the skeptical post-modernists' critique of modernity; they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the post-modern age.... The generally optimistic affirmatives are oriented toward process. They are either open to positive political action (struggle and resistance) or content with the recognition of visionary, celebratory personal nondogmatic projects" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 15). It is into this category that Václav Havel's postmodernism falls.

While some know Václav Havel as the President of Czechoslovakia, and others as the dissident playwright who lead a courageous struggle to end communism in Eastern Europe, few know him as a perceptive and important commentator on the "global automatism of technological civilization" (Havel, 1978, p. 115). It is in this role, however, that Havel has most to offer postmodern adult-educators in North America. Havel offers a promising alternative to postmodern adult-educators who wish to act meaningfully in a postmodern world.

Is Havel a postmodernist? While Havel, himself, might laugh at the suggestion, many of his ideas are clearly postmodern. Havel (1978), for instance, is careful to distinguish the ideals of the Eastern Bloc's "post-totalitarian" system from the reality of the Czechoslovakian people. He observes that while "post-totalitarian society demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline," "life moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self organization"; that while the system "contrives to force life into its most probable states," "life ever thrives to create new and 'improbable' structures" (p. 44). Following other postmodernists, Havel dismisses as fiction the possibility that logocentric, transcendental, totalizing systems can ever meet the diverse and indeterminate needs of human life. He understands "systemic change as something superficial, something secondary," and spurns abstract and technocratic political visions (p. 92). Political reality, he insists, "is not something that can be designed and introduced like a new car" (p. 71).

Postmodern leanings, notwithstanding, Havel believes people can act meaningfully to create an improved society. This distinguishes Havel's affirmative postmodernism from that of skeptical postmodernism. The postmodern problem of despair, Havel (1990) argues, stems not from hopelessness but from loss: "the loss

of metaphysical certainties, of an experience of the transcendental, of any superpersonal moral authority, and of any kind of higher horizon" (pp. 10-11). The question postmodernists must answer is "How can humans be subjects of actions, historically effective and free individuals, in a world in which subjectivity is unsupported by transcendent phenomena or metaphysical essences?" (Warren, 1988, p. 7). Havel's answer is revealed through his analysis of the Eastern Bloc's post-totalitarian society.

Havel reveals how the Eastern Bloc's post-totalitarian system strives to deny the diversity and particularity of human life, offering in its stead the unifying ideals of a monolithic system. The survival of such a system, however, depends on the full cooperation of all involved. As with science, the universalized and unified laws of the system take on the appearance of eternal Truths, and only that which confirms the Truth is acceptable and valued, all else becomes undesirable and valueless. Havel's analysis reveals just this, describing how the Eastern Bloc's post-totalitarian system created an ideology, a world of appearances, a mirage, or a web of lies to support its idealized conception of reality. The system's continued existence, however, depends upon its version of Truth remaining unchallenged; it must be perceived as the only reality, not one version of reality: "As long as appearance is not confronted with reality, it does not seem to be appearance" (Havel, 1978, p. 56).

Consequently, the ultimate threat to any system lies not in other idealized conceptions of reality, but in the actions of those who seek to expose all systematized accounts of reality for what they really are—fabrications. This is precisely what all postmodernists do. To say "the emperor is naked... because the emperor is in fact naked," it is possible to demonstrate "that living a lie is living a lie;" "to break through the exalted façade of the system and expose the real, base foundations of power"; "to peer behind the curtain"; to show "everyone that it *is* possible to live within the truth"; that "living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal"; that "the principle must must embrace and permeate everything"; that "there are no terms whatsoever on which it [the system] can coexist with living the truth, and therefore [that] everyone who steps out of line *denies it* [the system] *in principle and threatens it in its entirety* " (Havel, 1978, p. 56).

Havel is a postmodernist because he denies systems any basis for their claims to universality. He is an affirmative postmodernist because he sees the rejection of the system as the result of positive and creative actions that give birth to and nurture new

social "structures that are open, dynamic and small" (p. 118). According to Havel, the "ultimate phase of this process is the situation in which the official structures [of the system] simply begin withering away and dying off, to be replaced by new structures that have evolved from 'below' and are put together in a fundamentally different way" (p. 108). While Havel develops these ideas in relation to the post-totalitarian system of the East, he is careful to point out that they are equally applicable to the post-industrial system of the West: "in the end, is not the greyness and the emptiness of life in the post-totalitarian system only and inflated caricature of modern life in general? And do we not in fact stand... as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies?" (p. 54). This being said, we turn now to the implications of Havel analysis of the post-totalitarian system in the East for adult educators in the West.

Jane Cruikshank (1991) offers one example of North American adult-educators working in an oppressive system. In her paper entitled, "Ethical issues in university extension work," Cruikshank describes how "social change-oriented" adult educators working in departments of extension are often compelled to compromise their ethical standards in favour of those of the institution. Stripped of the power to determine the purpose and nature of the programs they provide, and unable—without running the risk of dismissal—to challenge the imperatives of the system in which they worked, many of the educators become disillusioned and deactivated. What hope does Havel offer adult educators such as these?

Havel is careful to point out that "the power of the powerless" lies not in directly confronting the system but by denying it in principle, by choosing to live in the truth and refusing to live in the lie. This process of living in the truth as opposed to living the lie of the system proceeds until, ultimately,

> the point where living within the truth ceases to be a mere negation of
> living with the lie and becomes articulate in a particular way, is the point at
> which something is born that might be called the 'independent spiritual,
> social and political life of society'. This independent life is not separated
> from the rest of life... by some sharply defined line. Both types frequently
> coexist in the same people. Nevertheless, its most important focus is
> marked by a relatively high degree of inner emancipation. It sails upon the
> vast ocean of the manipulated life like little boats, tossed by the waves but
> always bobbing back as visible messengers of living within the truth,
> articulating the suppressed aims of life. (Havel, 1978, p. 85)

By trying as best they can to turn away from the universalizing structures of the system and creating small, face-to-face, "parallel structures," these oppressed extension workers, indeed, any of us, can escape the despair of the postmodern condition. With courage and perseverance, such alliances contribute to the growth of movements whose

primary purpose "is always... to have an impact on society, not to affect the power structure...; they demonstrate that living within the truth is a human and social alternative and they struggle to expand the space available for that life; they shatter the world of 'appearances' and unmask the real nature of power" (p. 105).

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