

Tell Tale Signs: Re-conceptualizing Children Subjects and Childhood Subjectivities

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This paper explores Vaclav Havel's philosophical work on power through the analysis of a story about the Greengrocer, which is central to his analysis of power relations. It tells the tale of the ordinary, everyday life experiences of a shopkeeper, who runs a fruit and vegetable store, which Havel uses to demonstrate the complex nature of power relations in an ideologically charged society. In Havel's writing, the Greengrocer represents the citizen (or a child). Havel claims that all citizens, including children, are instrumental in maintaining the ideology of the establishment, and that they are both active creators as well as suffering victim subjects of the system. In my interpretation, the story of the Greengrocer represents *the Child* within the neoliberal ideology, and I shift Havel's thinking to accommodate these realities. In a nutshell, Havel (1985) questions the *Child's* "irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals" (p. 27). Through Havel's theoretical lens I argue how childhood subjectivities are produced under the ideological umbrellas of government rationalities. Havel's writing also implicitly features the subjectivity of a dissident, which I argue can be seen as a child-rebel. I analyze this through the example of tensions between dominant and resistant discourses in the early childhood centre, and the potential formation of childhood undergrounds.

The *Child's* story

The Child within the neoliberal ideology publicly behaves as is expected of him; he does not do anything extraordinary, and he lives his life expecting that the system, embodied by the teacher-guardians, will take no particular notice of him. He participates in the public domain, attends mat times, does and displays all the required artwork, and uses ideologically and politically correct language. He does all of this to remain untouchable by the system and its guardians. He knows and understands it is only a game, and he accepts its rules and plays his part well. Following Havel's analysis through the Greengrocer, my focus is on one particular moment of *the Child's* life, when he receives a strong recommendation from the head teacher to focus his artwork on the theme of Spring. This is not surprising to *the Child*, as this strong recommendation has come in various forms before. The recommendation comes with a very simple request: to create this artwork and display it in a way so that everyone, every parent, visiting lecturer and visitor to the early childhood can see it. The artwork does not say anything surprising or new; this theme, this request, has been expressed the year before and the year before that. The *Child* is in a familiar situation, as he sees the same artwork on the same theme produced by other children. So the *Child* creates his artwork, and places it with a teacher next to the notice board, right between the announcement of the increase of fees and the sign in book that all visitors need to sign.

In a Havelian sense the concern is why the *Child* creates this artwork and places it with a teacher on the notice board. The *Child* has always done so, because he is aware of the consequences of not displaying it: he would most likely be questioned by a teacher, and this incident could be written down, the *Child's* parents could be notified and the *Child* could be considered a disturbance to the system. The *Child* could also be labelled as non-cooperative and be subjected to various psychological or developmental evaluations, which could label him as a disturbance to the system. So if the *Child* wants to exist, play, interact and not be subjected to these practices, and therefore to remain unnoticed by the teachers-guardians, as he has done in the previous years, he needs to draw the picture of a Spring theme and display it. The 'picture of Spring' thus means that he officially, publicly declares that he has accepted the early childhood system, and that he is ready to live in harmony with it and its structures. In the Havelian (1985) argument this is the message that the *Child* conveys as he displays the sign: "I, ... [the *Child*] ... XY, live here, and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace" (p. 28), in other words he is able to play freely outside of this activity and not be observed or challenged as to why he did not follow this strong suggestion.

When the *Child* paints a picture and displays it, he acts *as if* he accepts the meaning of the ‘picture of Spring’. For Havel, the meaning of his actions lies not in the picture itself but in the performative aspect of responding to the request and placing it on the notice board. This act carries a different message than the semantics of the picture itself. As the *Child* displays the picture, the message conveyed to all other children walking past the notice board is: ‘I am just like you, I play my part in the system, I displayed the picture on notice board just as all of you have done your little parts. You cannot badmouth me, you cannot tell on me, I am supporting the system, and my public record is clean. My teachers know that I have fulfilled my part and that I have obeyed the order’.

Through Havel’s (1985) work, it can be imagined what the *Child* would think of himself, if the picture he was asked to display portrayed not Spring, but ideas of him giving away his toys and not wanting to play. The *Child* would then most likely be upset and embarrassed by it, and he would care about what is on the picture. The semantics of the picture would immediately become essential to the story, as it would produce an emotional response in the *Child*. He would probably feel undignified, he would be wary of anyone looking at him, and measuring him against this picture. He would be worried that others would act upon it and perceive it as the truth. However, the semantics of the picture that he was actually asked to display allow him to think to himself: ‘there is nothing bad, unusual or wrong with drawing a picture on the theme of Spring, and displaying it. So as Havel (1985) states, the picture of Spring supports the *Child* in

concealing from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high. And that something is ideology. ... It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them (p. 28).

I argue that Havel means to show that children, and other citizens, who live their everyday, ordinary lives, are central to power relations. Everyone is part of the system, even if they exist on the fringes of society or are often seen and portrayed by the traditional model of power as powerless (Havel, 1985). In the early childhood centre, all children are the victims and the pillars of the early childhood system and order, as they struggle with and at the same time support the policies and requirements of early childhood centres. The role ideology plays is to ensure that the system is working, as Havel claims, in accordance with the natural laws of life and the universe; and the early childhood system is desperately trying to maintain this illusion. However, the early childhood system does not publicly reveal this struggle, and instead presents itself with a public façade of care, support and democracy. To reposition Havel’s argument, no children believe in this early childhood system, and they are all able to see through its mist. Lutherová (2010) in her recent study explored how citizens reflect on their childhoods in ideologically charged kindergartens and schools. They remember their childhoods with memories of following orders and acquiring political childhood subjectivities (of victims and supporters), which they later abandon, once outside of the gaze of the public educational institutions (when they become rebels instead). However, as Lutherová’s research deals with memories, it does not represent the truth, but performative aspects of one’s experience.

Havel (1985) is concerned with an “ideological excuse” (p. 29) a notion that has a place within the early childhood centre. The ideology bridges the gap between the system and the *Child*, it provides a purpose to the way the *Child* behaves, acts and lives, no matter how false or true that reasoning is. This ideology is communicated throughout the education system, from the earliest days of early childhood education to university, and continues to be a seminal part of the *Child*’s growing-up. Havel is concerned with ideology as a “complex machinery of units, hierarchies, transmission belts, and indirect instruments of manipulation which ensure in countless ways the integrity of the regime, leaving nothing to chance...” and that it “...would be quite simply unthinkable without ideology acting as its all-embracing excuse and as the excuse for each of its parts” (p. 29). This ideological excuse explains the *Child*’s fear of being disciplined, of not being able to engage in his favourite play, and not being able to fulfil his desires. All children hide behind the ideological excuse as they display their paintings on the notice boards, and learn the appropriate ideologically charged knowledge.

The *Child's* private life grows and multiplies into plurality, diversified through his interests, ideas and friendships, as he self-governs within the acceptable level of freedom and independence. His personal domain is outside of the public sphere that demands that he adopt certain discursive positions. These positions include the self-discipline to follow orders, to be ready to conform with other children and to uphold the same ideals as others. The *Child* must publicly demonstrate that he is united with others in order to quietly live his private life and to develop his private self. Havel notes the difference between the private and public self as separated by a deep abyss, as the purpose of life is to “create new and 'improbable' structures ... [while] the system contrives to force life into its most probable states” (Havel, 1985, p. 29).

Havel's critique of society, transformed into the early childhood setting, challenges the official perception of a beautiful, happy, peaceful façade by exposing at the same time the ruthless, economic and selective power that structures it. The *Child*, the teacher, the parent are all part of these public structures of the system. They cannot escape them, so they all support the system, they interact with the ideas that the system outlines, they live within the system, and they behave according to the system's requirements. The system regulates and thrives on the power exerted in governing all children. Havel (1985) argues that the system and power relations

serve people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it. Anything beyond this, that is to say, anything which leads people to overstep their predetermined roles is regarded by the system as an attack upon itself. And in this respect it is correct: every instance of such transgression is a genuine denial of the system. It can be said, therefore, that the inner aim of the ... system is not mere preservation of power in the hands of a ruling clique, as appears to be the case at first sight. Rather, the social phenomenon of self-preservation is subordinated to something higher, to a kind of blind automatism which drives the system. No matter what position individuals hold in the hierarchy of power, they are not considered by the system to be worth anything in themselves, but only as things intended to fuel and serve this automatism. For this reason, an individual's desire for power is admissible only in so far as its direction coincides with the direction of the automatism of the system (p. 30).

Havel's critique of the system emphasises the notion of 'automatism'. Automatisms are how the lives of children are presented and lived in public. These are the predictable, expected answers to everyday questions that children are asked. Similarly, automatisms in children's stories, draw attention to the kinds of subjectivities they are expected to develop. Both adults and children are part of the society - they all work and learn, they all behave, they all live their life with these automatisms determining their positions in the public sphere. Children live with these automatisms: they cannot remove themselves from the public, they demonstrate public approval with the system, they maintain the power relations that hold it together, and they whisper in private as they do not trust the system. Whilst trusting the system within the private domain is not required, children must publicly behave as if they do trust and believe in it, and other children then observe this façade. So children need to be seen acting in public as if they actually care about the system, not just as if they tolerate it. By doing so, children 'accept' the social contract. As Havel (1985) argues, they do not need to believe in it, they just need to accept that it exists and that they have agreed to live within it. Havel claims that then the citizens “confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, *are* the system” (p. 31, emphasis in original): in other words, they live their life as a part of the power relations that produce the system.

When the *Child* accepts the rules of the game by supporting the governing ideology, his actions become part of the power relations that are absorbed into the structures that constitute the system. The ideology, according to Havel (1985), becomes an indispensable, active, power component in the system: “[i]t is a principal instrument of ritual communication *within* the system of power” (p. 31, emphasis in original). So the power is shaped by the relations between every *Child* contributing to the system, and the structure, where the ideology provides a “legitimacy and an inner coherence” (p. 32). The ritualistic automatism maintains the strength of the ideology through the child's everyday support. Havel claims that the ideology does not serve

the power, but that the power serves the ideology as “theory itself, ritual itself, ideology itself, makes decisions that affect people, and not the other way around” (p. 33).

Ideology within the system is the binding substance. This substance needs to remain untouchable, undisturbed and unchallenged, as the system depends on its ideology to be stable, to be publicly visible, in order to continue to operate and fulfil its function of supporting the system. The purpose is to protect the substance, the ideology. Because of these mechanics, power operates in ritualistic and anonymous ways. “Individuals are then almost dissolved in the ritual”, claims Havel (1985, p. 33), so there is “automatic operation of a power structure thus dehumanized and made anonymous” (p. 34). The *Child* in his anonymous existence follows the ritual of displaying the paintings of Spring on the notice board, to promote and support the de-individualised collective system.

Havel’s (1985) concern is that “automatism is far more powerful than the will of any individual; and should someone possess a more independent will, he or she must conceal it behind a ritually anonymous mask in order to have an opportunity to enter the power hierarchy at all” (p. 34). Rituals of power cause children either to be “ejected as a foreign organism” (p. 34) from the system, and to be ‘punished’ and pushed to the fringes of society, or they lead children to become ‘servants’ who are uniformly indistinguishable from each other. For the *Child*, and for all children, ideology is thus a safety net, a support mechanism that enables them to live life within the system. The complex layers of ideology confuse each child, as they are not able to reach its core. Havel calls this “the naked truth” (p. 34), as under each layer is another layer of an ideological excuse, and the ideology “transcends the physical aspects of power, something that dominates it to a considerable degree and, therefore, tends to assure its continuity as well” (p. 34).

The *Child’s* predicament

The story of the Havelian *Child* relates to the formation of childhood subjectivities. Why does the *Child* need to display the painting on the notice board and therefore publicly support the system? Why does he need to be loyal to the system in such a visible way that all other children, teachers and parents can observe it? The *Child* is already active in various semi-public domains, as he takes part in mat-time, and may participate in other games and activities. The *Child* has always done all that was expected of him, he has obeyed and been a loyal, ‘good’, ‘not difficult’ *Child*, and no one could question his ability to play cooperatively, participate or be outside of the expected developmental milestones and behaviours. So the Havelian concern is why the *Child* feels that he has to place painting of Spring on the notice board? Would the other children notice if the *Child’s* artwork is not on the board (and hence missing)?

Havel’s argument deals with the notion of the power of invisibility. The children, parents and teachers may not notice, or may even ignore, the pictures of Spring that are displayed, as these pictures are present on every notice board, in every room of the centre. What grabs children’s, teachers’ and parents’ attention is when the pictures become suddenly invisible - all who walk past the notice board may ask themselves: what is absent here, rather than what is present. By not displaying a picture, children, just like the *Child*, could demonstrate an act of resistance to the hegemonic discourse by not acting, and therefore not conforming to the demands of the system.

Children form what Havel (1985) calls the “panorama of everyday life” (p. 34). The concept of panorama paints a landscape within which the *Child’s* picture of Spring is just one small component without which the landscape would be incomplete. So the predicament that the *Child* faces is not whether someone would notice or not notice the displayed picture of Spring, but that by not displaying it he would become an anomaly of the system. The system needs this panorama to be solid and compact for the children, as it indicates to the *Child* how other children behave, and therefore how he should behave. If children would not exhibit their public approval with the system, they would be “excluded, fall into the isolation, alienate themselves from society, break the rules of the game, and risk the loss of their peace and tranquillity and security” (p. 34), no matter how fake and artificial these options may be.

The children who walk by the notice board have also hung their pictures of Spring, on the notice boards and walls of the rooms in the centre. All children display these pictures of Spring as a sign of agreement with the panorama of everyday life. Children are well adapted to the conditions that they live in; they know how they must behave; and they create the public sphere of the system, which in return shapes them. As Havel (1985) notes “they do what is done, what is to be done, what must be done but at the same time - by that very token - they confirm that it must be done in fact” (p. 34). As with the *Child*, the children are indifferent to each other about the act of displaying the pictures of Spring, but they at the same time compel each other to hang them, they are mutually dependent, and they support each other in their obedience. Children are supervised and controlled, but at the same time they are the controllers and supervisors of each other. And, as Havel argues, “they are both victims of the system and its instruments” (p. 34).

When the Havelian *Child* obeys the request to display the picture of Spring, as he did in the year before and in the year before that, and when other children do too, the whole city is flooded with pictures of Spring. It conveys an important message from one head teacher in one room to another head teacher in another room: ‘Look, I have done my job, all the pictures of Spring are in place. Now you need to make sure that all pictures are in place in your room.’ This produces what Havel refers to as the “social *auto-totality*” (Havel, 1985, p. 36, emphasis in original). The social auto-totality means that every *Child* is drawn into the sphere of power. Havel (1985) notes a change in human beings, in childhood subjectivities, as they may now “surrender their human identity in favour of the identity of the system” (p. 34), or in other words they will become part of the “automatism and servants of its self-determined goals, so they may participate in the common responsibility for it” (p. 34), which would ultimately put pressure on other children. This shapes the subjectivities of those who are comfortable with their positions and capacity of public involvement, and who feel uncomfortable with those who opt not to participate. By making all children participate, the system then produces everyone as instruments of a mutual totality, or the auto-totality of community within the centre. All children are subjected to the system and lack freedom, but all of them share the power. Whilst children differ in their levels of involvement, and there are different levels of power between the teacher and the *Child*, they all share the responsibility, and the guilt. They are all victims and supporters of the early childhood centre’s system.

Havel considers the system as a space where the lines of power are not linear, but cross-sectioned through each member of the society who, in his own way, is responsible not only for his decision, but also for the production of the public system. So the system is not a social order imposed by one group on another, but a system that has permeated the whole society, and is an ultimate factor in shaping it. This self-constituting dimension to the system is, as Havel (1985) notes, “impossible to grasp or define (for it is in the nature of the mere principle), but which is expressed by the entire society as an important feature of its life” (p. 34). Havel is concerned that inevitably there is a tendency in human nature to accept this condition and its creation, as well as to rebel against it. Havel argued that human beings have a capacity to respond to this system, and that each child can accommodate it, despite tendencies to revolt against it and to undermine its existence. The children cannot be seen as pure victims of the circumstances of the system, as they actively and ‘freely’ participate in the production of the public sphere, just as the child did when he displayed the picture on the notice board. Everything in the early childhood centre focuses on the survival of the system, so when the system alienates humanity, it does so only to the extent that the alienated humanity becomes the pillar of the system. Therefore, apart from subjectivities of victim and supporter there is a rebel in each child.

This Havelian notion represents a longing for dignity, moral integrity and the free expression of being that each and every *Child* desires. Yet, at the same time, every child is capable of living within the dimensions of the public system. The *Child* takes comfort in being anonymous, in being part of the crowd, in merging with the majority of children to “flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life” (p. 34). Havel thus articulates diverse and merging elements of the human condition rather than presents a dualist choice.

The *Child's* revolt

The *Child* plays the game that supports the system. But what if the *Child* would revolt? What if he decided to step out of the ritual, to stop publicly participating and refuse to contribute to what he may consider in private to be a farce of unity, togetherness and happiness? If the *Child* would reject the ritual, he would stop following the rules of the game that make the system. Of course, there would be consequences for the *Child* because of his decision. He could be labelled as non-cooperative, delayed in his social development, as not reaching the expected outcomes. The teachers passing these judgements upon the *Child* may not believe that the system is acting authentically, and they may not necessarily accept the *Child's* guilt in this revolt, however teachers are oppressed by the same conditions as the *Child*, when he displayed the picture of Spring. So the *Child's* teachers would become the “agents of automatism” (Havel, 1985, p. 39), cogs in the system, who would punish the *Child* because they have to, and who would use the same ideological excuse as the *Child* did when he displayed the picture. So, the *Child* must be ‘punished’ if he challenges the everyday panorama, and it is expected that the system must react to such a ‘crack’ in it. And teachers must ‘punish’ the *Child*, to display their own public loyalty with the system through fixing this ‘crack’: “... the power structure, through the agency of those who carry out the sanctions, those anonymous components of the system, will spew the ...[the *Child*] ... from its mouth” (p. 39).

The *Child* would not have committed just an individual offence. The *Child*, by opting out and deciding not to participate, would have disturbed the entire balance of power structures in the early childhood system. He would expose the system, destroy the beautifully painted surface of the rhetoric of the everyday public early childhood life, and therefore let other children see and feel the foundations of the power. He would have allowed children to have a peek behind the curtain of the system. He would shatter the power structures of the system, as he would illuminate what the system is about, and show other children that he does not care about potential repercussions, that he is not afraid. The *Child's* position would not be a threat because of his status or power, but because of the light that he would have cast on the grey surroundings, and cracks, of the early childhood panorama. Public resistance, or any deviance from the plan, is not tolerated. Havel argues that

... everyone who steps out of line *denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety* ... it is utterly unimportant how large a space this alternative occupies: its power does not consist in its physical attributes but in the light it casts on those pillars of the system and on its unstable foundations (p. 40, emphasis in the original).

So within the early childhood centre's system the boundaries between who is in power and who is not are shattered and exposed. Shore (1996) calls it “the collapsing of the traditional dichotomy between victim and oppressor” (p. 164). The boundaries between who is judging and who is accused dissolve, as the self-governance of the *Child* makes him realize that the system needs him to act upon his own behaviour, no matter how insignificant, to maintain the panorama of the everyday public life. No longer is it clear who the oppressor is and who is oppressed, and who is a teacher and who is the *Child*.

Concluding comments

The Havelian *Child* portrays a landscape in which children, and their childhoods, are subjected to the conditions of the everyday life. Their subjectivities as both victims and supporters of the early childhood centre's system are interwoven as they demonstrate the complexities of the ideology. The children are active agents in this process as victim and supporter subjects. Furthermore, children actively acquire knowledge and information that is outside of the public domain in the childhood underground, that constitutes their subjectivity of a rebel. Childhood subjectivities are produced within a system by what Havel, like Foucault (1988), would perhaps identify as technologies impacting on the self to produce the self. This paper has focused on the tension between the public and private domain, and serves as a story of hegemony and resistance in early childhood education. Through this examination of power relations I have exposed and

reconceptualised the production of childhood subjectivities within the early childhood centre: of a victim, supporter and rebel.

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