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## ENTANGLED PROTEST

### DISSENT AND THE TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE 1970S AND 1980S

‘A spectre is haunting Eastern Europe: the spectre of what in the West is called “dissent”.’ Thus begins Václav Havel’s famous essay ‘The Power of the Powerless’ (‘Moc bezmocných’) – a text which simultaneously described and shaped a new form of politics which had begun to emerge in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Neither working within the institutions of the communist systems nor trying to overthrow them, ‘dissent’ instead began with individual acts of defiance. Havel famously illustrated this with the parable of a greengrocer who placed the slogan ‘Workers of the world unite!’ in the window of his shop, ‘among the onions and carrots’. The greengrocer did not need to believe this slogan for it to have an effect; what he communicated with the slogan was not a quotation from the *Communist Manifesto* but his own subordination: ‘I, the greengrocer 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.’<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the greengrocer’s indifference to the slogan’s meaning, ideology nevertheless played an important role in Havel’s analysis of post-totalitarianism: it cloaked the greengrocer’s obedience in a statement of lofty principles. In this way, Havel argued, ideology superficially bridged the ‘yawning abyss’ between the ‘aims of life ... moving toward the fulfilment of its own freedom’ and the ‘aims of the system’. The ‘post-totalitarian system’, therefore, was ‘a world of appearances trying to pass for

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<sup>1</sup> Václav Havel, ‘The Power of the Powerless’, trans. Paul Wilson, *International Journal of Politics* 15, 3/4 (1985), 23-96, at 23. The essay was first published in Czech in 1978. An unpaginated version of Paul Wilson’s English translation is available on Havel’s official website at [www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=-2\\_aj\\_eseje.html&typ=HTML](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=-2_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML) (accessed Aug. 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Havel, ‘Power of the Powerless’, 27-28.