

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Political Argument And The Affective Relations Of Democracy: Recovering Vaclav Havel's Theory Of Associated Living

Abstract: This essay approaches Vaclav Havel's first and second presidential addresses as artifacts of democratization theory. We propose that Havel's speeches contribute to an affective theory of argumentation that can capture the lived, immersive quality of political phenomena such as the collective emotional experience of the post-communist transition. Specifically, we suggest that Havel's observations illustrate the function of arguments as attuning devices that connect, orient, and sometimes disconnect subjects within the affective atmospheres of common life.

Keywords: affect, affective atmosphere, democratization, post-communism

1. Introduction

Post-communism was more than a period of political and economic transformation. It was also an emotional period of hope, uncertainty and affective dislocation. It was not unusual early on for observers to claim that the post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe brought forth an "identity in crisis" or even an "existential revolution" (Matustik, 1993, p. 187). On both sides of the crumbling Berlin wall there was a tendency to imagine the impact of the political and social developments in the region in dramatic emotional terms. Suddenly everyone was "dizzy with democracy" (Jowitt, 1996). In his first presidential address in former Czechoslovakia, capturing the sudden and seemingly inexplicable shift in the public mood, Vaclav Havel referred to the last six weeks of the country's peaceful revolution as evidence that "society is a very mysterious creature" (par. 10). He also wondered about the atmospheric forces that seemingly overnight reconstituted the fabric of society: "Where did the young people who never knew another system get their desire for truth, their love of free thought, their political ideas, their civic culture and civic prudence? How did

it happen that their parents – the very generation that had been considered lost – joined them? How is it that so many people immediately knew what to do and none needed any advice or instruction?” (par.10).

We take Havel’s questions as a point of departure into a theoretical conundrum that has haunted argumentation theory for centuries. Namely, we inquire into the role that public arguments play in creating what we can call collective feeling or affect. Right away we face a certain terminological obstacle: We certainly have a range of concepts – emotion, feeling, sentiment, pathos, affect – that could potentially help us unravel this phenomenon of mass scale, where people who were strangers to each other, often disconnected in a physical as well as socio-cultural sense, could nonetheless experience a range of emotions collectively. However, each of these terms brings along theoretical legacies and trajectories that are often at odds with each other and they frequently fail to grasp or tend to ignore the political character and potential of the embodied, spatial dimensions of collective emotional experiences. And so, after a brief foray into the available theoretical perspectives on the affective social dimensions of argument, we turn our attention to Vaclav Havel’s first and second presidential addresses, which we approach as artifacts of democratization theory. We propose that Havel’s speeches contribute to an affective theory of argumentation that can capture the lived, immersive quality of political phenomena such as the collective emotional experience of the post-communist transition. Specifically, we suggest that Havel’s observations illustrate the function of arguments as *attuning devices* that connect, orient, and sometimes disconnect subjects within the “affective atmospheres” (Anderson, 2009; Stewart, 2011; Rickert, 2013) of common life.

2. The place of emotion in argumentation theory

Argumentation theory has long been a bit ambivalent on the subject of feeling, even if a large and diverse literature has been dedicated to it. Recently Raphael Micheli (2010) noted the somewhat irreconcilable historical division between normative and descriptive approaches to emotional appeals, leading him to suggest that emotion appears as “the poor relation of argumentation studies” (p. 1). This “second class” status of emotion is rooted simultaneously in normative theories’ preference for rational and reasonable argumentation, an issue that has been widely discussed and often condemned (McGee, 1998), and in descriptive theories’ minimization of emotional appeals’ role as either add-on strategies that can still be evaluated through formal standards of reasonableness (Manolescu,

2006) or as what Micheli refers to as “adjuvants” or enhancers of argumentation.

In either tradition emotion figures simply as a feature of arguments, rarely as a social or material dimension of discourse. Yet, when emotional appeals are “flattened” into text, argumentation theory ceases to behave as a social theory. Contexts become epiphenomenal to argumentative practice, discourse becomes disembodied, and the capacity of arguments to bring along political structuration is left undefined and unexplained. Furthermore, the place of emotion becomes a subject of debate. Is emotion a feature of speakers? Is it a feature of language itself? Or is it a latent capacity in people that we expect arguments to awaken? These questions not only put at odds humanistic with postmodern theories, and these days, we would add, neo-materialist, neurobiological theories of affect; they also seem to strain the borders of argumentation studies. As our various subfields develop their own tools and theoretical models, ironically, our capacity to capture the “worlding” (to borrow Heidegger’s 1962 term) function of argumentation is diminished. Rhetorical models, abandoning Aristotle’s roots, often rely on instrumental models of emotional argumentation with forceful appeals and passive audiences. While pragma-dialectics, with its focus on the formal features of discourse, often loses sight of the humans altogether.

Against this complicated background, we still would like to reclaim argumentation theory as a social theory proper, albeit we do so in an emergent model, heeding Heidegger’s (1962) reminder that Aristotle’s study of “the different modes of state-of-mind and the ways in which they are interconnected... must be taken as the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of Being with one another” (p. 178). As Greene (1993) has pointed out, “the subjectivity of social actors is constituted by argumentative practices” (p. 124). Moreover, argumentation forges the social “relations of coexistence” (Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, pp. 293-331). Not the least, as Keremidchieva (2014, p. 60) has argued, along with their media platforms, arguments work as agents of institutional contextualization, thus materializing the structures, routines, and horizons of social organization. To appreciate arguments in an emergent manner, in other words, is to recognize their role in assembling the social, the individual, and the material realm. In this vein, to the extent that they are an inevitable dimension of argumentative practice, it makes sense to think of emotions too as interstitial, social phenomena that emerge at the intersection of arguments, audiences, and material conditions. Or, as Rickert (2013) points out, “rhetoric impacts the senses, circulates in waves

of affect, and communes to join and disjoin people. It gathers and is gathered by things not as a denial of the social but as an essential complement to it" (p. x).

Our desire to re-examine the role that arguments played in constituting the affective dimensions of the post-communist transition is motivated by our own recollections of the common emotional intensity of those times as well as by the uncanny degree to which Havel's remarks are in tune with some valuable insights from the emergent interdisciplinary field of affect studies. We approach Havel's first and second New Year's presidential speeches as constitutive acts and artifacts of an indigenous, living democratic theory. Namely, we argue that Havel captures the affective threads of sociality that allowed individuals to move and be moved as a social organism at the point of the transition. To follow Havel in that trans-personal dimension, however, we need to shed the vocabulary of emotion that so often haunts argument analysis due to its easy psychologism and trade it for the concept of affect. The benefit of that shift, we believe, is that it would allow us to capture the complex interconnectedness between human and nonhuman agency, between public discourse and the material spaces of everyday life. In this sense, affect is a concept that can re-establish the access of argumentation studies to the structures, objects, and language that make collective lived experience possible. It allows us to attend to "collective affects that are not reducible to the individual bodies that they emerge from" (Ben Anderson, 2009, p. 80).

3. Vaclav Havel and the affective atmosphere of post-communism

We turn specifically to Ben Anderson's (2009) concept of "affective atmosphere" as a way to capture how public discourse bridges the "prepersonal and transpersonal dimensions of affective life and everyday existence" (p. 77). Like Havel, Anderson begins his analysis with a speech in a time of revolution, with Karl Marx's remarks on one other "revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing [European society] from all sides" (in Anderson, 2009, p. 77). Marx's observations of the 1848 revolutions lead Anderson into the notion that "affective atmospheres" are "impersonal in that they belong to collective situations and yet can be felt as intensely personal" (p. 80). And so was the affective atmosphere at the time when Havel spoke for the first time as president.

Despite the excitement and euphoria of the Velvet Revolution, at the time of Havel's first presidential address, the public was in the grips of a profound sense of uncertainty. What had just happened? What did it mean? What would happen

from then on? Along with disrupting the routines and upkeep of the governmental infrastructure, the fall of communism certainly disintegrated the ideological frames supporting Czechoslovakia's national identity. From within the ruins of the old narrative regime and from its material landscapes, the blueprint of the new society would have to be created. In addressing the nation on New Year's eve in 1990, Havel acknowledged the role of the favorable conditions in the sphere of international politics. Indeed, at least from the outside, the Czechoslovak revolution was just one more piece moving in the domino-like collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. For the people in the midst of that event, however, the turn toward democracy felt profoundly intimate. As Havel emphasized, the revolution came from within, as a collective psychic surge in search of its object of desire.

What would democracy look like? For many in Havel's audience the notion of democracy was derived from images of shiny Western product packages and full store shelves, from images of conspicuous consumption in Western films and glossy magazine covers, from novels and other literary texts that figured subjects free to roam the world and explore their social settings. Was that what democracy was all about? What would it take for Czechoslovak society to move closer to a democratic future? Those were among the many questions that abounded in the aftermath of the revolution. These questions, we suggest, figured the immediate aftermath of the Velvet revolution as a profoundly theoretical moment, an intense opportunity for competing imaginations and experiences to take form and come together.

In this context Vaclav Havel emerged as a distinctive voice that not only responded to the ambiguities of the occasion but also put together a coherent vision for what democracy could mean and do for the Czechoslovak people and what it would take for them to bring democracy about. Havel was certainly not speaking in a vacuum. Democracy was not a concept that he invented. Democracy was indeed a foreign word, one whose roots could be traced to core Western liberal philosophies. Yet, bringing democracy to Czechoslovakia or any other country in the former Soviet block was not a simple matter of translation (Bruner & Marin, 2007; Keremidchieva, 2009). As we aim to demonstrate, Havel articulated an original understanding and blueprint of democratization, one that deviated in significant ways from the dominant western models of transition which privileged structural political reform (Verdery, 1996; Anderson, Fish,

Hanson & Roeder, 2001). In our analysis of Havel's speeches, therefore, we do not attempt to offer a comprehensive reconstruction of his rhetorical response to the challenges of the transition. Our task is more narrow. It is to recover and highlight those aspects of Havel's democratization theory that hold the potential of enriching our theoretical understanding of the affective dynamics propelling societies in transition.

In his first New Year's address Havel laid out the public sentiment as the foundation for the post-communist transition. He quickly located the source of social and political instability in the breakdown of society's moral and affective terminology. As he argued, "concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility or forgiveness lost their depth and dimension, and for many of us they represented only psychological peculiarities" (para. 5). He associated the environment of "moral contamination" with a tendency to disassociate the individual from the collective structures of affect so as they "learned not to believe in anything, to ignore one another, to care only of ourselves" (para. 5). In his argument such processes of individuation and affective alienation were precisely the reason why the communist regimes were able to assemble their "totalitarian machinery" (par. 7). Such assemblages were inhumane, according to Havel, precisely because they were impersonal and affectively distant.

"Freedom and democracy," on the other hand, "include participation and, therefore, responsibility from all of us" (par. 8), according to Havel. Importantly, his notion of participation is not limited to showing up; rather it is measured by a sense of distance from the cynicism and "enforced mask of apathy" (par. 10) that marked the previous regime. It is defined in affective terms as a manifestation of "human, moral and spiritual potential" (par. 72). Herewith lies Havel's most profound statement as a democratic theorist who situates certain affective inflections as the foundational conditions for democratic society. As he argues, "First of all, people are never just a product of the external world; they are also able to relate themselves to something superior, however systematically the external world tries to kills that ability in them. Secondly, the humanistic and democratic traditions about which there had been so much idle talk did after all slumber in the unconsciousness of our nations and ethnic minorities, and were inconspicuously passed from one generation to another, so that each of us could discover them at the right time and transform them into deeds" (par 11). In this formulation, a democratic disposition appears at the intersection of spiritual and

material forces and, importantly, it does not remain static. On the contrary, it operates on the principle of affective contagion which, as Nigel Thrift (2008) suggests, spreads and multiplies affect most especially through imitation (p. 223).

The affective contagion via imitation thesis might make sense in view of Havel's observation of how different generations joined forces in enacting the Velvet revolution; however, we believe that Havel offers an additional insight regarding what sets off the phenomenon of affective contagion. Specifically, he points to a principle of affective identification or empathy as the glue that keeps society together when he claims that "all human suffering concerns every other human being" (par 13). Moreover, such identification appears as a source of confidence that can allow affective contagion to cascade up and down the scales of sociality from interpersonal to international relations and back. As Havel asserts, "Let us try to introduce this kind of self-confidence into the life of our community and, as nations, into our behavior on the international stage. Only thus can we restore our self-respect and our respect for one another as well as the respect of other nations" (par. 74).

And so in Havel's first New Year's address as president, the project of the Velvet revolution is defined in profoundly affective terms that transcend the state of mind of individuals, but instead form the terrain of politics. The project of democratization is one of attuning society to certain affective moral registers that are meant to be circulated and disseminated. In Havel's words, "Our country, if that is what we want, cannot permanently radiate love, understanding, the power of the spirit and of ideas. It is precisely this glow that we can offer as our specific contribution to international politics" (par. 17). Politics, for Havel, "should be an expression of a desire to contribute to the happiness of the community rather than of a need to cheat or rape that community." Politics, he adds, "can also be the art of the impossible, that is the art of improving ourselves and the world" (par. 18).

Despite its strong embrace of the role of positive affect as the foundation of democratic society, Havel's first New Year's address does not fully reveal how central that concept is to his argument. We now turn our attention to his second New Year's address because by that time the public mood had changed dramatically. Gone was "the joyful atmosphere of those first weeks of freedom" (par. 80) and in were "all the pleasant surprises of the past year" (par. 80). Four decades of communist rule had left deep traces in the collective spiritual

landscape; hence any effort at an alternative political environment had to address the affective condition of the society. In response, Havel presented democratization as a process of what Kathleen Stewart (2011) calls “atmospheric attunement,” a process of re-negotiating people’s interactions and relationships with each other and their environment.

In the 1991 address, Havel repeatedly referred to a house-themed metaphor in order to illustrate the affective infrastructure needed for a democratic transition. During the weeks following the Velvet Revolution, the fall of communism had sparked a country-wide euphoria that allowed little space for assessing the scope of the communist legacy and its impact on establishing an alternative. A year into his presidency, Havel captured the common feeling of disillusionment that was now setting in: “We knew that the house we inherited was not in good shape. The stucco was falling off in places, the roof looked rather dubious, and we had doubts about some other things as well. After a year of examination, we have discovered to our distress that all the piping is rusted, the beams are rotten, the wiring is badly damaged” (par. 5). If the house metaphor was meant to stand in for the structure of society itself, then it highlighted two dimensions of democratic transition – an exterior and an interior one. The exterior one referred to easily identifiable flaws in the material environment. The interior dimension, on the other hand, described the affective communicative practices through which society inhabited its environment and made sense of it.

In tune with the materialist orientations of affect theory, Havel’s 1991 speech suggested that the interior and exterior dimensions of political transformation cannot be separated. The first post-communist year revealed the degree of infrastructural damage, environmental, and juridical degradation inherited from the previous regime. As Havel put it, “We have discovered that what a year ago seemed to be a neglected house is essentially a ruin” (par. 6). More significant, however, was the affective degradation that had set in society: “In an atmosphere of general impatience, nervousness, disappointment, and doubt,” Havel warned, “elements of malice, suspicion, mistrust, and mutual accusation are insinuating themselves into public life” (par. 8). Amidst this situation, Havel recognized a feature of affective atmospheres that Ben Anderson finds as well: “an atmosphere holds a series of opposites – presence and absence, materiality and ideality, definite and indefinite, singularity and generality – in a relation of tension” (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). Havel identified such tension at the heart of his people’s

inability to move forward on the eve of 1991. For him, the “suffocating atmosphere” (par. 82) at the end of 1990 was due to some tension in the affective atmosphere: “hope for a better future is ever more obviously intermingled with the opposite feeling: fear of the future” (par. 7).

More significantly, such atmospheric tension would create the conditions for further affective attunement and displacements. As Kathleen Steward (2011) finds,

an atmosphere is not an inert context but a force field in which people find themselves...It is an attunement of the senses, of labors, and imaginaries to potential ways of living in or living through things. A living through that shows up in the generative precarity of ordinary sensibilities of not knowing what compels, not being able to sit still, being exhausted, being left behind or being ahead of the curve, being in love with some form or life that comes along, being ready for something – anything – to happen, or orienting yourself to the sole goal of making sure that nothing (more) will happen (p. 452).

Affective attunements, however, do not come out of nowhere; affect invariably mobilizes its objects. On the eve of 1991, Havel discovered, “we have defeated the monolithic, visible, and obvious enemy and now – driven by our dissatisfaction and by the need to find a living culprit – we are searching for enemies in each other” (par. 8). Society, he declared, was in a state of “shock,” immobilized by the absence of material referents and signposts to all that was meant to come. Such “subliminal uncertainty” (par. 82) marked by “the feeling that the horizon of the new order is distant, dim, and indefinite” meant for Havel that “many of us cling to partial and substitute horizons, forgetting that the welfare of individuals or groups is possible only against the background of the general welfare” (par. 82). To establish an atmosphere of democracy, would require a sense of shared ownership that finds space for all of humanity under the roof of Havel’s proverbial house.

4. Conclusion

Havel’s house analogy figured the project of democratization as more than a systems change, but as a process of building a new affective space that required certain affective investments. A sense of ownership transforms a house into a home. As Havel reminded his fellow citizens, “[R]egardless of how badly the house was damaged during the long years of [communist] rule, the house now

belongs to us, and it is entirely up to us how we rebuild it." Such investment, however, would not materialize out of thin air.

Herewith, we believe, lies Havel's and affective theory's contribution to argumentation studies. Public arguments do more than give form and assign culturally specific words to the affective intensities which, as Anderson (2009) points out, are only imperfectly housed in the proper names we give to emotions. Rather, public arguments assemble, re-shape, and channel the fragments of feeling that otherwise would float disparately, failing to form cohesive society. Furthermore, public arguments harness and house these fragments, serving as the archives and museums of social character, whose displays both narrate and manage the culture's mood. It is not surprising, therefore, that Havel's own solution to the affective immobilization of his people was to redirect their attention to some other elements of their environment, so as to reconstitute the affective atmosphere. As he pointed out, "we are all inclined to forget the several great and positive surprises of the first year following our rebellion against the totalitarian regime. I think it is my duty today to remind you as well of the good things that have happened, accomplishments that a year ago we could scarcely could have imagined" (par. 82).

However, public argument should not be reduced to an instrument of collective emotional management because it is always already embedded in a given affective atmosphere. Rather, we perceive it as an *attuning device* that shapes the quality and intensity of the connections that allow disparate bodies, objects, and affects to appear in formation. In this way, we believe, public argument serves a political function as it gathers the elements that make up the society. This "worlding" function of public argument would not have been possible, however, had public argument not been immersed in the ebbs and flows of affect, which as Seigworth and Gregg (2010) suggest, "arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*; in the capacities to act and be acted upon... in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise)" (p. 1). With such an emergent model of affective discourse it is easier to see why democratization in the aftermath of communism couldn't be just a product of institutional re-design; it has rather been a process, fueled by feeling and desire, of finding each other, albeit on other terms, once again, in common.

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