

**Bologna Institute for Policy Research**

SAIS Bologna Center  
via Belmeloro 11  
40126 Bologna, ITALY  
+39 051 291 7811  
[www.jhubc.it/bipr](http://www.jhubc.it/bipr)

Date: 6 December 2012

Speaker: Adela Gjuricova, Senior Researcher, Czech Institute of Contemporary History, Academy of Science, Prague, Czech Republic

Chair: Mark Gilbert, Professor of History and International Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Center, Italy

**“The Man Who Never Wanted to be President:  
Vaclav Havel's Dilemmas in the Velvet Revolution”**

Adela Gjuricova prefaced her lecture with the following quote from ‘The Sense of an Ending’ by Julian Barnes, “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.” In formulating her views on Václav Havel, Gjuricova draws upon abundant documentation available on his life and leadership, as well as on collective personal memories that range from intellectual admiration to harsh criticism. She examines four contradictions about Havel, and highlights how they contributed to him becoming the leader of the Velvet revolution. Gjuricova posits that Havel’s contradictions are not only the reasons behind his success as a leader, but also the source of his weaknesses.

Havel was born into a prominent entrepreneurial and intellectual Czech family, whose vast fortunes were later confiscated by the radical state Socialist regime. Consequently, Havel did not receive a complete formal education. He undertook a laboratory assistantship and later found work as a stage technician at a small theater in Prague. Writing was Havel’s intellectual outlet and a means of chronicling the social realities of communism. Havel’s plays brought him much acclaim as a playwright and notoriety as a dissident voice.

Gjuricova states that despite labeling himself an amateur in all of his political undertakings, Havel was a perfectionist by nature and extremely practical. This contradiction is evidenced, for example, in the shrewd strategies Havel employed in determining when and how to disseminate information. Additionally, he knew the importance of maintaining a strong presence among people. Gjuricova argues that this type of perfectionism enabled Havel to remain ‘down to earth’ at crucial emotional moments such as the Prague Spring, when the newly appointed government brought an end to censorship in 1968. The government’s move toward democracy gave Czech citizens the space to find their collective voice, which they used to call for additional reforms.

The second contradiction Gjuricova explores concerns how Havel led the opposition and enjoyed the authority of a leader, yet did not possess any formal authority. Havel used this contradiction to establish a dissident community during the 1970s. Furthermore, his 1975 open letter to Gustav Husák, then General Secretary of the Czechoslovakia Communist Party (CCP), catapulted him from being a blacklisted dramatist to an influential dissident leader. The social consolidation

borne out of fear in Czechoslovakia prompted Havel to warn Husák that the sad state of affairs compelled him to change the country himself. Havel's social analysis of 1970s Czechoslovakia had great influence as a public act.

Gjuricova describes Havel's third contradiction as working in relative isolation, yet being influential and oftentimes coming to parallel conclusions with western social science. She chronicles the challenges faced by Havel in publishing his writings, as well as the dissidents' dearth of knowledge of much political literature well into the 1980s. Gjuricova argues that while Havel did not know western sociology, his arguments were strengthened by his 'solidarity with the weak ones', which informed his theories and approach to the state. An example includes his successful defense of a group of young artists whose music was an 'authentic expression of people crushed by the misery of the world'. Gjuricova asserts that while Havel's acts of solidarity may have limited his intellectual ability, they strengthened his analytical ability.

Havel was an anonymous co-author of the Charter 77 declaration, a human rights document which spawned a movement of the same name. Gjuricova illustrates how persecution brought people together and cemented the idea of a parallel polis to counter the lies of the communist regime. In Havel's essay "Power of the Powerless," he addressed the meeting of dictatorship and consumer society. On November 17 1989, the suppression of a nonviolent student protest by riot police kindled the Velvet revolution. The ensuing awakening of the public conscience pushed a reluctant Havel into taking political action. He was elected president within six weeks of the onset of the revolution. This fourth contradiction reveals how, despite claiming to be non-political, Havel remained at the forefront and conducted politics throughout much of his life.

Gjuricova concludes her lecture with a commentary on Havel's presidency. She describes his political methods as 'bohemian and revolutionary', which endeared him to the public. Despite his critic of parliamentary democracy, Gjuricova emphasizes how Havel's leadership embodied the reflective, solidarity and community-building aspects of his anti-political politics. These tendencies lifted Havel to the heights of power, yet also represented his weakness while being in power.