

# Ideology as ritual

Avram Lyon

Monday, December 5, 2011

Václav Havel's greengrocer displays a sign in his shop with the words, "Workers of the World, Unite!" For Havel, the action, undertaken without much thought on the part of the petty merchant, provides key insight into the relationship of people to their environment and demonstrates the essence of ideology:

[T]he sign helps the greengrocer to conceal 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*. (Havel 1985, p. 28)

In this reading, ideology is not a set of beliefs held by a person or advocated by or for a person, but rather a semiotic veil, a means of distancing the signifier from the ordinary signified. Havel terms this the "excusatory function of ideology", and he argues that it is central to the survival of any post-totalitarian regime in a larger country, where the raw disciplinary power of a dictator will not suffice to establish control. The excusatory function is essentially that of deniability, or self-delusion, as the ideological signification of the signifier is attributable to something or someone outside of the speaker. That is, the speech act that is the placing of a sign by the potatoes or a perfunctory reference to Lenin in the introduction to a new volume of literary criticism is seen by the speaker as indirect speech; as a sign taken from an established socialist semiosphere, the stock phrase comes to signify less its intrinsic signification ("call for