

The New Faces of Totalitarianism: The Case of Venezuela

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Like the virus of a pernicious disease, totalitarianism keeps appearing in ever new masks, like a Proteus who slips eel-like out of our grasp, abusing all the means of the free world, distorting them in order to destroy, a sort of epidemic that overpowers its first carriers as well as its subsequent allies. These were phrases used by Karl Jaspers to warn that there is no “nation that is proof against giving birth to [this] evil, even though in other ways and in a different spirit.” All over the world, he feared, “I dread the self deception which [Germans] have experienced—that this could not happen here. It can happen anywhere.”¹

Similar warnings were a constant argument in the substantive theories on totalitarianism that began to emerge in the 1930s, before the term was hijacked in the 1950s by “value-free” political scientists seeking to reduce the complex essence of this new political form to a quantifiable, objective category for the classification of political types, and subsequently abused by political leaders looking for a powerful image to demonize the adversary in the bipolar context of the cold war. Having lost reference to the causes and spirit of the totalitarian phenomenon—the identification of which was one of most significant contributions of political philosophy in the first half of the 20th century,—or having chosen to ignore them, in order to subscribe the notion that democracies can survive through mere procedures without any solid foundation in truth, the Western world has largely become oblivious to the re-emergence of the totalitarian virus under new faces in several Latin-American countries.

Venezuela is the locus of the new totalitarian virus in the American continent, bringing new impetus to the Cuban regime, increasingly expanding its radius of influence to countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and Nicaragua, and threatening, in greater or lesser degree, the stability of Chile, Colombia, Peru, Honduras, and Mexico. This essay, however, will not reproduce the long catalogue of human rights violations, autocratic manipulations of democratic institutions and practices, or significant threats to regional peace and stability in order to support this assertion. Such effort could not be anything but redundant, since this information is profuse,

¹ Karl Jaspers, “The Fight against Totalitarianism,” in Philosophy and the World – Selected Essays (Washington D.C.: Gateway Editions, 1963), 68-87.

detailed and well-documented. Despite the alarming abundance of facts pointing toward the radical and accelerated destruction of democratic values in these countries, most Western political leaders and intellectuals remain unaware, unconvinced, or disconcerted at best, about the meaning of the available evidence. Hence, rather, this paper will revisit the substantive theories on totalitarianism, developed mostly by political philosophers that experienced first-hand the rigors of totalitarian regimes, in order to recover those essential coordinates of the totalitarian phenomenon that are specifically applicable to the Venezuelan case and, therefore, indispensable for a proper diagnosis of the real nature and destructive potential of its current regime.

I

It has been eleven years since the “Bolivarian Revolution” of Hugo Chavez rose to political power in Venezuela, a country considered for many years to be the showcase of Latin American democracies and the sole exception to the spread of military dictatorships in the region during the four decades between 1950 and 1990. After leading two unsuccessful military coup d’état attempts, Chavez was elected democratically in December of 1998 for a five-year term without reelection. During the inauguration ceremony, he refused to follow the formal oath prescribed in the Constitution, promising rather to bury the dying legal text and begin a new and definitive “Bolivarian” period in the country’s history. Venezuelans, who had massively supported Chavez’ message of change, soon confirmed that the arbitrariness, violence and arrogance of his very first act as President would become the norm and style of the new government. Chavez now vows to remain in power until the year 2036.

Throughout these years, most political actors, both in Venezuela—including opposition leaders—and abroad, have chosen to follow the advice of those “prudent voices” warning against the need to not overestimate the magnitude of this country’s political crisis. These prudent voices recognize the permanent climate of tension and violence in Venezuela’s political life and the radical polarization of its society. They are most apt in describing, furthermore, in great detail, the government’s systematic violation of individual rights, the increasing and expanding curtailment of basic liberties and the arbitrariness with which the regime concentrates and expands its power. At the same time, however, these voices find an unquestionable “democratic credential” in the fact that both government and opposition groups appeal to the verdict of the

majority as the means to settle differences and provide a legal foundation to the exercise of power. They conclude, accordingly, that political life in Venezuela, despite Chavez' "unconventional" leadership, continues within the framework of democratic procedures and, hence, that there are no real reasons for concern while both sides in tension maintain their disposition to restrict their struggle to the limits established by law. As a common corollary to their prudence, some even add that a radical polarization in a democratic society is not an abnormal fact but rather a healthy sign of political development, as stable societies of mature bipartisan tradition tend to passionately adhere to one of two alternatives. In a defiant manner, the prudent voices always ask: How can people call Chavez a dictator after so many elections? How can the term 'autocracy' and much less 'totalitarian' be applied to a government that observes legally established procedures?

Any true attempt to answer these questions requires an effort to comprehend the anthropology that guides the Bolivarian Revolution or, in other words, to unveil its understanding of the specifically human. It is a great delusion to simplify the essence of this revolution to the populist demagoguery of a shrewd politician, particularly astute to remain in power. The language and actions of this revolution reveal a specific political form, *sui generis*, the main elements of which are necessary to identify. The attempt to uncover the vital reality that underlies the revolutionary message and the elements that synthesize its political goals is not a vain theoretical exercise that can be left to academic debates, because it may very well be the case that the Bolivarian Revolution involves an understanding of reality with which it is simply impossible to coexist.²

The variety of terms used by the "less prudent voices"—often called radical—to characterize the nature of the Venezuelan regime run the whole spectrum from euphemisms like "government with a democratic deficit" or "competitive autocracy" to the more usual categories of "authoritarianism," "dictatorship," "neo-dictatorship," "tyranny" and, with increasing frequency in recent times, "totalitarianism." The problem with the more classical terms of 'authoritarianism' or 'dictatorship' in their different variants is that they hide the essence of the Bolivarian Revolution. Authoritarian regimes and dictatorships do not rely on a comprehensive doctrine about human existence. They reject, of course, the fundamental democratic values, and

² See Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in Open Letters, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 127-132

their methods of coercion are, almost always, extremely repressive. However, authoritarian and dictatorial regimes do not strive to regulate every aspect of ordinary life, reveal the meaning of history or lead society to a future of definitive plenitude based on an ideological project. Their goals are much more limited. Generally, they try to justify themselves for reasons of a temporal emergency—e.g. anarchy—that demands the widespread use of force to reestablish order. The essence of their power, therefore, is ephemeral since it is always linked to a temporal situation of abnormality. Even the dictatorship of the proletariat was defined as a transitory phase in a revolutionary process that would eventually lead to a future situation of permanent stability. A dictatorship may last several years, even decades, but the dictator will always argue that his extended presence remains necessary until he manages to reestablish the necessary conditions for the exercise of freedom. Almost always, of course, the real motivation for dictators is to satisfy their self-interest and ambition for power, which is the classical case of tyranny. Other dictators look for politic, economic and social benefits for their relatives and close associates, in which case their regimes are called satrapies or sultanic dictatorships.³ But even in these cases, the dictator does not seek to go beyond what he needs in order to satisfy his selfish purposes. For Latin American people, the terms ‘autocracy’ and ‘dictatorship’ are fittingly associated with the words criminal, cruel, inhuman, repressive, arbitrary, corrupt and selfish. The term ‘dictator,’ in particular, brings to the collective memory of Venezuelans a concrete experience of violence and unlawfulness. Until the year 1958, Venezuela had less than ten years of civilian rule since its independence from Spain in 1821. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, why it is difficult for an ordinary Venezuelan to associate the word dictatorship with a political regime that upholds principles that are, at least in principle, the antithesis of what they understand as or remember from dictatorial regimes. The Bolivarian Revolution presents itself as a democratic movement (process) of liberation for the definitive redemption of society in time, called to last forever, firmly grounded in law and always subject to the verdict of popular sovereignty. In particular, and at least during the first few years of Chavez’ regime, it was difficult for Venezuelans to ascribe the word “selfish” to a regime that continuously proclaims its complete and generous dedication to the most fundamental needs of the people.

³ Juan J. Linz offers a detailed classification of types of authoritarianism in Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes (London: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

What about the term ‘totalitarian’? Unlike terms like ‘autocracy’ or ‘dictatorship,’ this word does not evoke a direct and concrete experience in the collective imagination of the Venezuelan people, but only a historical reference, somewhat vague, linked to the images of the Nazi holocaust or the Soviet gulags. A considerable number of opposition leaders, furthermore, have deliberately rejected the use of this term considering it detrimental to their political strategies. Others argue that this term is extemporaneous and prefer to speak about a “totalitarian vocation,” or “totalitarian impulse,” in order to warn against the potential harm of a threat not completely developed yet. Under such unpropitious circumstances, it is worth noting that, especially in situations of extreme frustration and powerlessness, the term ‘totalitarian’ has begun to prevail, almost spontaneously. Once witnessed the way in which the regime invades all the powers of government, absorbs every activity of society, defines the meaning and sense of history and subordinates human life to its revolutionary project, it is not easy to find a more exact word than the adjective ‘total’. In fact, it was in this same spontaneous way that historically the term ‘totalitarianism’ first appeared, once the opponents to Mussolini found that with the word ‘dictatorship’ they were rather flattering a political system with a vocation for totality.⁴

Could the reality that the term ‘totalitarianism’ seeks to disclose be indispensable to explain the inexistence of democracy in Venezuela despite Chavez’ high margins of popular support confirmed by the periodic celebration of elections under conditions of apparent constitutional legality? Unquestionably, the Bolivarian Revolution has notable differences with Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union, and it would be absurd, therefore, to compare Venezuela’s reality with the degree of terror and extermination practices of these regimes. A political category, furthermore, can never be applied identically to different cultural and historical contexts. The Venezuelan political situation has its own characteristics, linked to its tradition and cultural ethos. However, as Aristotle warned, it would also be senseless to expect from a political category a degree of exactitude that is necessarily alien to its nature. The

⁴ Until recently it was generally maintained that Mussolini was the first to use the term ‘totalitarian’ in order to describe the vocation for totality of his political project. Recent works by Jens Petersen reveal that before Mussolini used the term, Italian opposition leaders had been using the term arguing that the traditional category of ‘dictatorship’ was insufficient to reveal the unique character of the fascist regime. The first opposition leader to use the term was Giovanni Amendola on May 12, 1923. Its use was expanded after the publication in 1926 of Italia y Fascismo by Luigi Sturzo. See Jens Petersen, “The History of the Concept of Totalitarianism in Italy,” in Totalitarianism and Political Religions, ed. Hans Maier (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3-21.

relevance of a political term consists in its ability to illuminate the essential elements of a political system and explain its deeper motivations and goals. By rejecting *a priori* any reference to the term ‘totalitarianism,’ we ignore the effort in contemporary political philosophy to define and delimit the essence of a new autocratic form of government that could not be explained through the traditional concepts of authoritarianism and dictatorship and that, above all, could re-emerge in any country at any given time given its roots in the spiritual crisis of the modern world. It belongs to prudence the determination of whether it is politically useful to use the term ‘totalitarian’ as an instrument of political controversy. Havel, for example, chose to coin the term ‘neo-totalitarian’ for his political struggle in Czechoslovakia in order to recognize the differences of his country’s situation with the prototypical totalitarian experiences in Germany and the Soviet Union, but also to underscore the core similarities between both realities, especially in reference to a shared understating of human nature and the meaning and scope of politics. Beyond the term, the real question is whether the theory developed by those political philosophers with direct experience under totalitarian regimes helps to bring more clarity to the analysis of Venezuela’s current political situation.

Essentially, the substantive theories on totalitarianism explore the phenomenon of radical rebellion against the common understanding of the relationship between man and politics in Western civilization. In this tradition, one of the most fundamental principles is that politics, from the point of view of its ends, is always limited by the fact that it can never deliver everything that man needs for his fulfillment as a human being. It belongs to politics to promote and safeguard the necessary conditions for human existence. Its noble role is to develop and preserve an order of justice and prosperity, and provide the adequate environment for a genuine growth of human life. However, even when it is extremely successful in achieving these goals, politics can never reach the intimate nucleus of a human being, that inner sphere where each man finds the meaning and value of his own existence. Beyond what politics can and must achieve, it corresponds to each human being the search for his plenitude in the light of his conscience, in the life of virtue, in the gift of self, in his relationship with God, in sum, in those vital options inscribed in his soul. Man finds or loses his fulfillment in the response he freely gives to his human vocation. By virtue of the nature of his call, man can even find plenitude overcoming the most adverse circumstances of iniquity, injustice and poverty. Politics, then, is not the decisive

realm where man finds the meaning of his existence. The scope of political action is limited by human nature.

The totalitarian rebellion consists in demanding the ‘total’ for politics, rejecting any notion that includes any type of limit, especially in opposition to the distinction between the things of Caesar and the things of God in the Western Christian tradition. The more concrete ways to apply this unlimited understanding of politics vary according to historical circumstances, but ultimately, the various manifestations of the total converge in the boundless desire to redeem man through politics. From different perspectives, but with a chilling unity, this is the core argument in the works of those political philosophers who had the tragedy of living under totalitarian regimes. The essential coordinates of the totalitarian spirit they strove to uncover are especially relevant to the analysis of Venezuela’s current regime.

I

A **millenarian perspective** of politics guiding the totalitarian spirit is the fundamental coordinate around which the substantive theories of totalitarianism converge.⁵ According to this perspective, political power is not exercised to improve this or that aspect of society, secure better conditions for justice and material well-being or attend to the most urgent needs. The totalitarian spirit points well beyond these goals because it rejects any definition that includes limits to the transformative potential of politics. From a millenarian perspective, the goal of politics is to achieve a permanent state of complete happiness, justice and solidarity in this world. Since any imperfection is unacceptable, politics must be understood in terms of its unlimited potential to secure for man everything he needs for his plenitude. This is the substratum of what revolutionary leaders animated by the totalitarian spirit call a “realizable utopia”: Why should politics have limits, when its purpose is precisely to transform society in order to eradicate every injustice and lead the people toward a future of definitive well-being? At bottom, the totalitarian spirit rebels against the agony that always accompanies human

⁵ On the millenarian perspective in the totalitarian spirit, see the trilogy by J.L. Talmon, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy (London: Westview Press, 1985); Political Messianism (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968); and The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980). Also, James H. Billington, Fire in the Minds of Men – Origins of the Revolutionary Faith (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

existence. From a millenarian perspective, everything, ultimately, becomes subordinate to this duty of politics to achieve human happiness.⁶

Political messianism is a distinctive element of totalitarianism since the totalitarian spirit postulates a state of perfect harmony toward which man is irresistibly driven now that a political movement assumes the commitment to **redeem man** from the sources of evil in the forces of history. The *polis*, therefore, becomes the only and real plane of reality since it absorbs the totality of human existence. Politics is redefined as the art of applying a philosophy of redemption to the organization of society. Its goals are only fulfilled when it manages to guide and direct every aspect of life. In light of this enormous objective, the revolutionary struggle cannot be restrained by a pre-existing structure of laws, institutions or moral guidelines. As guarantors of prosperity and by virtue of their redemptive mission, totalitarian activists need only to remain firmly committed to the eradication of evil. In their mind, the great magnitude of the evil they confront justifies any method of action, including destruction and violence.

The next essential coordinate of totalitarianism derives from the first two. The particular evils of a society are not the real problem. The totalitarian spirit rebels against the existence of evil as such, which is why the goal of politics is to identify, confront, destruct and eradicate the great evil that underlies all particular evils. True politics, therefore, consists in a colossal and definitive battle against the supreme evil. Through politics, man can be redeemed from the basic structure of evil. The revolutionary struggle, according to the **eschatological** coordinate of the totalitarian spirit, is not simply a radical change in the history of a nation, but the culmination itself of its history. Politics becomes the scenario for the decisive battle that will usher a future of unending perfection.⁷ In the eschatology of the totalitarian spirit, every past time was simply a preparation for this moment of radical conversion. After the totalitarian ideology has offered a glimpse of the glorious time to come, it is impossible to move backwards. A totalitarian regime may admit the need for preparatory stages of transition, but always as an anteroom for the eventual perfect realm of the final times.

⁶ For the definition of politics based on the concept of the “realizable utopia” in the founding documents of the Bolivarian Revolution, see Alberto Garrido, Documentos de la Revolución Bolivariana (Caracas: author edition, 2002).

⁷ On the eschatological coordinate in the totalitarian spirit, see Waldemar Gurian, “Totalitarian Religions,” in The Review of Politics 14, nº 1 (January, 1952): 3-14; Hans Maier, “Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships: ‘Totalitarianism’ and ‘Political Religions’,” in Totalitarianism and Political Religion, ed. Hans Maier (New York: Routledge, 1996), 199-215; Eric Voegelin, Science, Politics and Gnosticism (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1968).

This is the true sense of the revolutionary struggle in a totalitarian process. The totalitarian revolution is the moment of rupture in history. It constitutes the transition from evil to goodness. With the revolution, a total and definitive redemption surges from within history that divides time in two: a somber past and a splendid future, the transition from the realm of wickedness to a state of absolute goodness.⁸ This future will only become possible if the conversion extends to everything, which is why every vestige of the past which allowed evil to subsist must be absolutely annihilated. The revolution, therefore, must destroy for this conversion from evil to goodness to be complete and radical. Hence, a language of war must always accompany the totalitarian message. The entire nation becomes a great army in this apocalyptic confrontation, with citizens acting as soldiers and members of battalions. Engaged in a total war, military terms are most appropriate to describe the substance of revolutionary politics since totalitarian activists classify the course of historical events in terms of tactics, counter-attacks, strategic movements, pyrrhic victories, decisive battles, and so forth.⁹ In this state of constant existential bellicosity, any sphere of activity in society is adequate for the revolutionary struggle. The most ordinary activities of everyday life, even the most trivial, must be re-interpreted from the perspective of this immense struggle. The magnitude of the battle is such that it demands the **total mobilization** of all the nation's resources.¹⁰ Only thus can the nation achieve the essential unity decisive for victory. Gradually, every intermediary group in society is absorbed into the regime's gigantic task of building the future, while the state becomes the only valid reference for the individual.

The goals of the revolutionary struggle are feasible and, indeed, it is possible to proclaim a realizable utopia because injustice, from a totalitarian perspective, comes from a world defectively structured. The eradication of evil is within human grasp provided that man identifies the source of every problem in the current structures of society. This is the **Gnostic coordinate** of the totalitarian spirit.¹¹ The totalitarian leader not only knows the evil that underlies every evil, but has also found the magical formula to eradicate it by transforming the structures of society

⁸ This is the expression that Maritain quotes from Beryaev in The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain, Vol. 11, ed. Otto Bird, Integral Humanism (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 185.

⁹ Sigmund Neumann, "The Rule of the Demagogue", American Sociological Review 3, n° 4 (August, 1938): 491.

¹⁰ On the meaning of revolutionary struggle and the concept of total mobilization, see Kamaludin Gadshiiev, "Totalitarianism as a Twentieth-Century Phenomenon," in Totalitarianism and Political Religion, ed. Hans Maier (New York: Routledge, 1996), 293-311; Hans Barth, "Reality and Ideology of the Totalitarian State," in The Review of Politics 1, n° 3 (July, 1939): 275-306.

¹¹ On the Gnostic coordinate in the totalitarian spirit, see Voegelin, Science, Politics and Gnosticism, 83-114.

through political action. In Marxist ideology, the whole history of mankind can be deciphered from the perspective of class struggle. Other totalitarian approaches find the key in “race,” “capitalist greed,” or “Yankee imperialism.” Hence, it suffices to achieve a great Napoleonic victory over the supreme evil, whatever its name may be, for all subordinate evils to disappear. Politics destroys the supreme evil by re-ordering the structures of society according to the formula for the interpretation of history that the totalitarian ideology provides. The messianic leader, therefore, by virtue of his knowledge of both the ultimate source of evil and the means to eradicate it, has a **prophetic** mission. He is the way to a future of redemption because he has the knowledge—and determination—to prevail over evil.

A fundamental characteristic of the Gnostic element in the totalitarian spirit is that the act of salvation belongs exclusively to the sphere of autonomous human action. The Gnostic drive consists in the determination to destroy the created order of existence, experienced as intrinsically defective and unjust, in order to replace it with a perfect and just order through man’s creative power. Naturally, this unlimited faith in the transformative power of politics entails the elimination of any notion of a transcendent ground as foundation to the order of existence. Any idea of a transcendent God must be rejected because it prevents man from autonomously controlling his own existence. The Gnostic coordinate of the totalitarian spirit is the extreme manifestation of the will to power,—*libido dominandi*—an excessive passion to control the whole of reality instead of submitting to it. Camus described this existential state as a “metaphysical rebellion” against the created condition of human existence. The rebel does not accept limits to human action because he rejects a structure of existence that implies subjection as the paradoxical realization of freedom and the very condition for a truly meaningful existence.¹²

The next coordinate of the totalitarian spirit uncovers the **language of the elect**. The conversion entails the absolute recognition of the good and the firm rejection of evil. Only those that have undergone the revolutionary conversion can recognize goodness. Whoever does not share this vision simply remains with evil. The revolution that splits history in two also separates the people: a city of the elect and a city of the malignant. The supporters of the revolution are the elect, regardless of their moral behavior, because their actions can only be judged in light of that

¹² See Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); On the situation of existential rebellion in the totalitarian spirit, see also Dante Germino, “Italian Fascism in the History of Political Thought,” in *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 8, n° 2 (May, 1964): 109-126.

ulterior reality that only few are yet able to perceive with clarity. In the city of the malignant remain those that refuse to accept the revolutionary truth. A wicked motive is the only reason why someone would not embrace something as evidently true and beautiful as the revolutionary vision. Hence, it is always possible to explain the behavior of an opponent by some wicked motive underlying his actions. This justifies the need to degrade them in their human condition and treat them with contempt. As people of evil, they are nothing but “fascists, terrorists, cowards, corrupt, liars, and trash,” Chavez repeatedly insists. While the elect sanctify themselves by giving themselves wholeheartedly to the totalitarian ideal, demoniacal forces always drive the malignant in their perverse plots to destroy it. The elect only dream a future of love and solidarity, but the malignant only conspire to impose their selfishness and greed. This passion for unanimity feeds the **pseudo-religious** fervor of totalitarian movements.¹³ Those that dissent from the totalitarian ideal are guilty of a terrible offense because they constitute obstacles in the path toward fulfillment. The malignant must be converted, or simply removed, since there is no space for them in the new world that the messianic leader has promised to build. For reasons of tactical realism, it may be politically expedient to distinguish several layers in the city of the malignant. Many remain in this city not from conviction but because they have been duped or manipulated. Weak of spirit, they have been unable to resist the message of evil. Any effort to rescue the confused and attract them to the vision of the good requires the restriction and, ultimately, the elimination of the different means that the malignant use to confuse and distort reality. These means are, mainly, family, church, private education and the media. The certainty to possess the only and true doctrine of redemption explains the arrogance and prepotency of the revolutionary leaders of totalitarian spirit. They cannot accept the existence of other doctrines or groups with the right to remain independent, with their own dignity and validity. If tactical considerations force the totalitarian regime to tolerate the presence of perverse obstacles for a certain amount of time, there is always the purpose to eventually achieve **unanimity** around the revolutionary truth. In the society of the future, all will rejoice together in the truth of their prophetic leader.

Considerable effort is always given to understanding the specific content of a totalitarian ideology. However, any attempt to comprehend the dynamic toward the perfect future society is vain. Beyond vague general statements, it is not possible to understand, for instance, what

¹³ See Carl J. Friedrich, “The Deification of the State,” in *The Review of Politics* 1, n° 1 (January, 1939): 18-30; Gurian, “Totalitarian Religions”, 3-14.

equality means in a classless society or what justice would be in the society envisioned by the “Socialism of the XXI Century.” This point is essential because the totalitarian message always presents itself as an ideology of hope for the construction of a new order, when in reality it is nothing but a movement of **nihilistic destruction**.¹⁴ The true essence of a totalitarian movement does not lie in its philosophy or doctrine but in its dynamics as a process of permanent demolition. There is no positive ideology but the firm determination to destroy any pre-existing order. The strength of the totalitarian dream subsists, despite its lack of concrete content, because the process of destruction is kept at all costs. For Chavez, “we may not have arrived at our goal, but by destroying the evil structures of the past we are certainly moving in the right direction.” The totalitarian leader, therefore, always needs a conflict, a threat, something that needs to be demolished in order to keep the dynamic movement of the process. This is what really animates the revolutionary process. Calmness, order and stability are mortal enemies to the vitality of the process because they represent alarming signs of weakness, resignation or lack of conviction in the revolutionary promise. The totalitarian leader, therefore, knows that he must maintain the enthusiasm of the masses through fiery phrases. He must continuously warn them about the great threats to the process, the imminent storms approaching, the constant conspiracies to murder him, and the relentless ability of enemies to regroup. The totalitarian leader maintains a constant spirit of battle by repeatedly appealing to the heroic vocation of the people. An irrational and violent discourse is more conducive to this end, since it unleashes more efficiently the violent instincts of the masses. Just as it is useless to engage in debates about the viability or coherence of the revolutionary project, it is also an illusion to hope that the “process” may someday stabilize. As a permanent revolution, it is “action pure and simple, a dynamic in the void, a revolution in variable time.” Its ‘philosophy’ is “to use any available opportunity to extend the power of the movement, in order to add more elements under its control.”¹⁵ The totalitarian processes, therefore, are revolutions without a coherent body of principles. They are movements that maintain their vitality as long as they manage to generate enthusiasm in the feelings of empowerment that come from participating actively in the process of destruction. Totalitarian

¹⁴ This is the coordinate developed with great precision by Hermann Rauschning, The Revolution of Nihilism (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1939). See also Gerhart Niemeyer, “Lenin and the Total Critique of Society: A Study in Ideological Activism,” in The Review of Politics 26, n° 4 (October, 1964): 473-504.

¹⁵ Rauschning, The Revolution of Nihilism, 23.

processes are the denial and absence of any positive affirmation since their determination to *undo* is what truly drives their nihilistic character. Paradoxically, this lack of principles is one of the main secrets of their effectiveness: **permanent revolutions**, impossible to bring to a close.¹⁶

This lack of concrete content explains why it is inaccurate to speak about a totalitarian “ideology” and why, rather, it is more appropriate to use the word “myth” in the sense developed by Georges Sorel. Unlike an ideology, a myth according to Sorel is not a description of a perfect future society but the call to a decisive battle. The value of a myth does not lie in its rational coherence but in the force of inspiration that it is capable to generate within a certain group of society. Only the myth allows the group to maintain solidarity, the heroic sense of their struggle and the constant disposition to the sacrifice of self. The function of the myth is to produce a state of conscience properly disposed to the destruction of the existing order in the absence of an alternative vision. The **totalitarian myth**, unlike a utopian ideology, is eminently negative, since it consists in the transformation of reality through its radical destruction. Since it has no determinate plan or ideas, the myth cannot be criticized. It simply justifies itself by the fact that evil subsists and suffering continues. The acceptance of the myth, therefore, does not require and intellectual act but the vital disposition of the will to participate heroically in the destructive action of the present.¹⁷ The “truth” of the myth does not depend on what it proclaims or promises but in the deep and instinctive response that it manages to evoke from the people. Instead of texts and arguments, totalitarian movements rely on symbols to transmit their content. In order to move through symbols, the myth awakens the deepest instincts of a people, intensifying emotions, hatreds, resentments and hopes.¹⁸ Always directed against an enemy (e.g. Jews,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51. As Juan Carlos Rey explains: “for Chavez his revolution, unlike the typical revolutions in Latin America, is a continuous and progressive process that develops indefinitely in time. Chavez recalls Trotsky when he explains that this is a “permanent revolution, by which the original constitutional power—the revolutionary power—is permanently alive.” “Mito y Política: el caso de Chavez en Venezuela,” in J. C. Rey y G. T. Aveledo, Actualidad de las formas irracionales de integración política, Cuadernos del Centenario Nº 3 (Caracas: Fundación Manuel García Pelayo, 2009), 19.

¹⁷ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme (New York: Peter Smith, 1941). On the concept of myth as developed by Sorel, see Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 475-496. Also Yves R. Simon, Freedom and Community (New York: Fordham University Press, 1968).

¹⁸ Juan Carlos Rey explains thus: “Chavez’ discourse is mainly oriented towards producing an effect over the motivational zones of human life, analogous to the effects that music produces, and not over the mechanisms used by reason for logical or mathematical demonstrations. Logical contradictions do not matter to him if he manages to generate a “certain epical spirit,” if he creates a sentimental link between believers who understand themselves as united against a common enemy.” “Mito y Política: el caso de Chavez en Venezuela,” 11.

capitalists, imperialists), the myth appeals to the values of nationalism and gradually becomes the true historical purpose of the nation. A moment comes when it is no longer possible to distinguish between country and revolution. A new sin, then, is added to those that do not share the myth. The malignant opponents are also traitors who despise their country.

Closely linked to the totalitarian myth is the will to channel through means of political antagonism the psychological phenomenon of **resentment**. A fundamental component of the totalitarian message is the constant reference to experiences of humiliation, so that people constantly re-live them until they configure the personality so deeply that they burst out in hostile and rancorous emotions of vengeance. Max Sheller identified the following stages in the process of resentment:

a. In the first stage values are still acknowledged or, at least not questioned, but the qualities of the adversaries are deceitfully ignored or plainly denied. The capital instrument in this stage is slander.

b. The second stage is characterized by blindness to the values of the adversary. The negative disposition toward the adversary characteristic of the first stage now extends to the denial of the value itself.

c. Resentment becomes creative and engenders new values. The negative becomes the positive. From this moment on, the process unfolds through the following sequence:

i) The revolutionary ideal has the monopoly on virtue; any antagonist ideal is the opposite of virtue.

ii) The particular ideal generated by resentment is elevated to the essence that underlies reality. Its name is now God, nature, humanity, people, historical law, etc.

iii) The enemies of the revolutionary ideal are the adversaries of the great essences. They are the enemies of God, the country, their social class, their race. Only the group that identifies with the great revolutionary ideal has the right to hold political power, since only they are in position to distinguish between good and evil.

iv) Every suffering, injustice, and misery comes from the groups and institutions representing the opposition to the ideal. Their opposition is criminal.

v) The victory of the new ideal is projected as the ultimate sense and meaning of history.¹⁹

The figure of a **messianic leader**, in charge of delivering the country, occupies the center of the totalitarian process.²⁰ He does not owe his authority to the state or its laws but to the “will of the people” and the supernatural obligation that God, providence, history or fate has conferred upon him. Hence, he is free to abide by the laws or not, because he enjoys a kind of supreme authority that cannot be challenged under any circumstances. As the chosen instrument of supra-historical forces, he embodies the supreme interests of his people. At times, the will of the majority can lose its way or be deceived, which is why polls and elections are unreliable. The true expression of the general will only finds its voice in the word and vision of the prophet.

The messianic leader is fanatically convinced about his mission as redeemer of his people. He never tortures himself with crises of skepticism or lack of confidence in his own ability to fulfill his enormous responsibility.²¹ His faith and self-confidence simply overwhelm people, especially in a historical context prone to skepticism and thirsty for authenticity. The messianic leader is not legally accountable for his actions, since history is his only tribunal. His elevated position makes him immune to ordinary criticism. Given the magnitude of his task, it is necessary to establish the line of hereditary succession with the great names of history, so that he can also hold his title as prophet of his century.²²

The mission of the messianic leader is so vast that he cannot devote any time to the ordinary obligations of government. Called to eradicate evil and establish a realm of perfection, he must maintain his focus on the distant future and concentrate on the coming centuries. He

¹⁹ Manuel García Pelayo, “Notas sobre el Resentimiento en su Dimensión Psico-Política,” in Max Scheler, Sobre el Resentimiento (Caracas: Fundación Manuel García Pelayo, 2004), 17-20.

²⁰ On the characteristics of the messianic leader in the totalitarian spirit, see Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956); Leonard Schapiro, El Totalitarismo (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981); Richard Overy, The Dictators – Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004); Denis de Rougemont, “Passion and the Origin of Hitlerism,” in The Review of Politics 3, nº 1 (January, 1941): 65-82; Neumann, “The Rule of the Demagogue”.

²¹ See Hannah Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 407.

²² In the Venezuelan case, the leader consummates in the XXI century the redemption work that his predecessors began in the XIX century (Bolívar) and XX Century (Castro). Chavez has gradually chosen to present his prophetic presence in terms of a revolutionary trinity. This division of history in three stages, typical of Gnostic movements, is also a fundamental component of the totalitarian re-interpretation history. See Eric Voegelin, From Enlightenment to Revolution (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975); and The New Science of Politics (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

cannot be held responsible for such trivial matters as crime rates, inflation levels or infrastructure problems, so he must constantly scold his subordinates for their failure to fulfill their menial tasks. The leader reminds his people that he has not responsibility on these trivial matters by protesting on behalf of them, even with more urgency than opposition leaders. Sometimes he warns with great sadness that perhaps the incompetence and lack of commitment of his subordinates will force him to deal with such mundane matters. The meaning of the threat is, of course, that he would have to distract his attention from his epical responsibility. With a leader bravely engaged in such a great battle, people do not understand how his subordinates are incapable of solving the small challenges of ordinary life. How different would everything be if they all shared the same determination and commitment of the leader, if they carried in their hearts his same sense of urgency! “How can anyone dare to blame the leader,” Chavez often asks, “when [he] suffers more than anybody else the incapacity of his own government?”

The malignant and confused cannot grasp the sublime character of the events in the revolutionary process. Hence, it is necessary to force them to participate in the activities of the leader, even the most trivial ones, since all of them are living testimonies for posterity. Only from the perspective of the elect can people recognize the transcendence of watching their leader sing, read poems, tell jokes or play baseball. Interminable speeches, several times a day, transmitted on every television and radio station, are evidence of the patient willingness of the leader to share his message of salvation to those that remain confused.

A strange duality accompanies the figure of the messianic leader. On the one hand he is a simple man, of humble roots, a people’s soldier. He never loses his links with the people. He uses a popular language to speak about the issues that ordinarily concern the poorest sectors of society. The world is very complicated, but the leader always has an answer. There is never a subject beyond his wisdom, but he never boasts. As the humble teacher of his people, he explains how everything, ultimately, tends to either good or evil through a very simple formula: everything that agrees with the revolutionary key is good, everything that opposes it is evil. When he raises his voice, he speaks for all centuries. When he whispers, he shares in an atmosphere of intimate reflection some hidden secret of his infinite love. In the same speech he unexpectedly moves from one style to the other, in order to reflect how the passion of his raised voice is grounded in the serene truth of his heart.

At the same time, however, the proximity of the leader with his people is mixed with a peculiar distance. He has no friends or equals. No one can come close to him. People do not know where he lives or how he organizes his life. He often disappears for several days only to reappear as if nothing had happened. The messianic leader justifies this distance arguing that it is the sacrifice that corresponds to his immense dignity, superhuman mission and historic responsibility. The leader, just as the Sun King did, surrounds his being with an aura of mystery in order to help his people realize the infinite distance that separates him from ordinary human beings. His luxurious lifestyle does not impact his popularity. It only shows the level of comfort that someday everyone will enjoy once the future of plenitude arrives. The leader is the mirror of the time to come.

The totalitarian process gradually acquires a **universal dimension**.²³ Totalitarian activists refuse to circumscribe the goodness of the revolutionary ideal and the promise of future plenitude to such a small country. It is selfish to deny other people the heroic leadership and prophetic vision of their leader.²⁴ The revolution, thus, extends its arms, conscious that the division between the elect and the malignant also applies to the peoples of the world. Even more, the revolution gradually recognizes that the real source of evil lies outside the country's boundaries. The internal enemies are nothing but accomplices—lackeys—of universal evil. The purpose to extend the revolution abroad corresponds to the totalitarian passion for unanimity. Without an external projection against a real or imaginary enemy, totalitarian regimes cannot maintain the fanatic devotion upon which its survival depends. The revolutionaries of totalitarian spirit see the world in a permanent state of emergency, in a situation of perpetual battle.

In international meetings, the free countries cannot adjust to the fact that totalitarian regimes reject all conventional patterns of diplomatic conduct. Slander, insults and obscenities are usual components of the totalitarian discourse. Blunt, vulgar and threatening statements, that under different circumstances would have constituted *casus belli* for any nation that respects

²³ On the universal coordinate in the totalitarian spirit, see Michael Burleigh, The Third Reich (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); Waldemar Gurian, "Totalitarian Religions".

²⁴ This is how Heinz Dieterich, a well-known intellectual and fervent admirer of Chavez, explains it: "Two hundred years after the Independence, the angel of history, the Angelus Novus, finally manages to spread his wings, stop before the tragedy of humanity and intervene on behalf of the victims of Capitalism. . . In this historical moment, Hugo Chavez not only transcends the geo-political scope of Simon Bolivar's liberation praxis but extends, objectively, to the likeness of Napoleon Bonaparte.... [Through] this "universal spirit" ... in a beautiful dawn, man becomes a self-determining agent of the post-bourgeois society." Hugo Chavez y el Socialismo del Siglo XXI (Buenos Aires: Nuestra América, 2005), 17-19.

itself, are welcomed and celebrated as acts of courageous sincerity.²⁵ The free countries fail to understand—or pretend to not recognize—that the foreign policy of totalitarian regimes only aims at division and struggle. Only when it is too late they come to recognize the impossibility of maintaining peaceful coexistence with a totalitarian regime powerful enough to extend its radius of influence. For the totalitarian mind, international meetings are critical scenarios for the revolutionary struggle and, especially, most valuable instruments of domestic politics to destroy the morale of internal adversaries. According to the totalitarian logic, it makes full sense to invest the resources of the nation for the expansion of the revolution. The malignant, in their greed and selfishness, are unable to understand the boundless generosity of the revolutionary process.

One of the main obstacles to recognize the totalitarian nature of a regime is the subject of legality. A basic category to define the essence of a government is the distinction between legitimate and arbitrary power, according to whether the ruler is or is not subject to laws. An autocracy, the common category that groups together tyranny, dictatorship and totalitarianism, is any political system in which rulers are not subject to a pre-existing legal framework and the different powers of the state lack sufficient institutional power to force them to submit to the law. Totalitarian regimes, therefore, are autocracies in the classical sense of the term since all the branches and institutions of power submit to the will of the leader, who is ultimately the source of every law.

At the same time, however, totalitarian regimes are characterized by a vast amount of legislation and for being particularly scrupulous in the formal application of the law. Every action is based on some statute or decree, in accordance to the conventional procedures that democratic systems use to preserve the rule of law. It is not easy to accuse a totalitarian regime of arbitrariness because the leader always shields his acts with the meticulous application of legal procedures. This ability to bend the substance of democracy and use its procedures to legalize arbitrariness is one of the most sinister attributes of the totalitarian virus. Totalitarian regimes place us in the difficult situation of explaining the paradox of an autocratic ruler that scrupulously follows the law. This is why it is necessary to distinguish between legality and

²⁵ Friedrich and Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy, 58.

autocratic legalism, and establish the difference between the traditional meaning of law and the ideological sense with which totalitarian regimes distort it.²⁶

. The problem goes well beyond a lack of independent legislative and judicial powers. The leader, of course, controls all the branches of government and uses his enormous power to impose his personal will. However, this situation is insufficient to understand the meaning of “law” in the dictionary of the revolution. The messianic leader, and the public powers at his service, do much more than simply bend the evident meaning of a law in order to justify their arbitrary actions. When the Venezuelan regime, for instance, shuts down the main opposition television station based on “the termination of its license”, and confiscates its assets “to return to the people what in justice belongs to them,” it is not simply acting hypocritically to hide its true purposes. The government shows no signs of arbitrariness in its language. To the contrary, the regime asserts that finally a government obeys the real spirit and purpose of the laws. The decisive point is to understand the meaning that totalitarian leaders give to the essence of law. Positive legislation is interpreted in terms of the laws of history that guide the dynamics of the process. In the totalitarian spirit, the “laws of history” contain an existential judgment, not a normative one. The totalitarian leader is convinced of having finally reached the real foundation of the authority that legitimizes every law. The purpose of the laws is not to achieve a *consensus iuris* but to impose a legal framework in permanent flux, the substance of which derives from whatever is recognized as useful or necessary to the march of the revolutionary process toward absolute justice in the perfect society of the future. For the messianic leader, any action is lawful if it helps to push the movement of history in accordance to the revolutionary formula and removes the obstacles from the path to redemption. In the totalitarian context, therefore, the term ‘law’ has a specific meaning: it does not express a framework of stability within which human activity can take place, but it is rather the expression of a movement. Whatever helps to keep and drive the dynamics of the process toward the historical objective of the revolution is legal, and illegal anything that may halt or obstruct the process.²⁷ The expiration of the license of a television station, for example, is a valuable opportunity for the revolutionary process to snatch from the enemy an instrument of manipulation, taking thereby a new step forward toward those future times when everyone will recognize the indisputable goodness of the revolutionary ideal.

²⁶ Friedrich and Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy, 5

²⁷ See Hannah Arendt, “Authority in the Twentieth Century,” in The Review of Politics 18, n° 4 (October, 1956): 403-417.

Just as totalitarian systems redefine the meaning of law, they also transfigure the most elemental ethical norms. Totalitarian regimes operate under a system of moral values that is radically different from the common categories used to distinguish between moral and immoral acts.²⁸ This is the source of the cynical attitude that characterizes totalitarian leaders when they celebrate the virtue of the most vicious acts. Generally, people attribute such cynical behavior to hypocrisy. Again, however, the problem is more complex. Behind what seems as simple cynicism we find the will to judge the ethical value of human acts according to their level of contribution to the revolutionary ideal. Moral behavior is defined in terms of the correspondence of the act with the ideal for the perfect society of the future. In this context, hatred and resentment are particularly important moral qualities, given their potential to contribute to the removal of obstacles for the revolutionary struggle.

In the totalitarian **revision of the moral code**, violence is an expression of justice and fortitude. The lowest human passions are exalted in order to exploit rancor, envy, division and hatred amongst people. Common sense arguments appealing to the need for unity and reconciliation are useless. These arguments are unpersuasive because the leader understands good and evil in a radically different way. Peace and concord are signs that evil, once more, is resisting, tempting people to accept exploitation once more to prevail. When, on the contrary, pugnacity and division are the norm, a lively virtuous society rebels against injustice in a heroic battle to crush the forces of evil. In the mind of totalitarian leaders, the violent nature of the revolutionary process is not inconsistent with its message of love and solidarity. Self-righteously, the messianic leader looks up to heaven to denounce so much hatred, suffering and pain, while justifying his most egregious acts by virtue of the pious mission that history and providence have given to him.

According to the moral code of the revolution, liberty is absolute loyalty to the revolutionary process, regardless of personal conviction; freedom of expression entails the firm commitment to liberate society from deceit; opposition to the revolutionary ideal is synonymous to selfishness and wickedness; legal and constitutional is any action that contributes to the movement of the process toward future plenitude; democratic elections are collective manifestations of faith in the revolutionary process and an opportunity to measure the conversion efforts to persuade those in the city of the malignant; intervention in domestic issues of other

²⁸ Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 303

countries is the generous revolutionary commitment to the ecumenical nature of the project; culture is the repression of individuality in order to collectively exalt the truth of the revolutionary vision.

This redefinition of morality does not take place surreptitiously. Every day a government representative asserts something that is patently contrary to facts. The leader explains the new meaning of words with utmost frankness, without threatening the stability or popularity of his regime. On the contrary, popular support increases precisely in the worst instances of violence and repression. By revealing “sincerely” the secrets of his system, the leader explains how “his hatred is grounded in love.”²⁹ This is one of the most complex realities of the totalitarian phenomenon: the popularity of the leader increases when his power to dominate becomes more evident. In a society infected by the totalitarian virus, typical problems like rising unemployment, inflation or crime levels are almost irrelevant as factors to analyze changes in public opinion.³⁰ Situations which would produce severe crises for democratic governments have very little effect on the perception of the people. Nothing is predictable any longer since the totalitarian virus destroys the essential conditions for rational persuasion.

Terror is as an essential characteristic of the totalitarian reality. This is perhaps the most complex coordinate of the totalitarian phenomenon and, certainly, the one most often misunderstood. As indicated above, the Nazi concentration camps or the Soviet gulags are the general paradigm in the minds of many when reflecting about the possible applicability of the term ‘totalitarian’ to Venezuela’s current regime. Even Hannah Arendt, in her classic text Origins of Totalitarianism, argued that totalitarian terror is only possible in countries with a population large enough to allow the extermination of a considerable part.³¹ According to this

²⁹ Juan Carlos Rey explains Chavez’ “love” thus: “The repeated and often exaggerated expressions of love for all fellow human beings that, as he constantly underlines, inspire his whole life, does not keep him from frequently unleashing all his ire against his political enemies, who he considers as the embodiment of every evil, and to exercise violence against them, proclaiming as his justification that Christ did not come to this world to bring peace, but to struggle against injustice. He compares his frequent clashes with the Catholic hierarchy with the way Christ used his whip to expel the merchants from the Temple. The frequent use of violence is justified, in Chavez’ view, because it is at the service of a political project with a real messianic character, since it aims at nothing less than the incarnation of the kingdom of God in this world, a lofty purpose that justifies death itself. “Mito y Política: el caso de Chávez en Venezuela”, 20.

³⁰ See Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 457-470.

³¹ Ibid, 414.

criterion, it would be inaccurate, in a strict sense, to define as totalitarian the experience of a small country like Cuba.

In later writings, however, focused on the totalitarian experience in Eastern European countries, Arendt revised her concept about the nature of terror in a totalitarian reality.³² Mass extermination was, indeed, the cruel method that Hitler and Stalin used to generate terror. But other totalitarian regimes, however, soon recognized the possibility of using less extreme means to obtain the desired results. The problem, therefore, is not to delimit the methods used to generate terror, but to understand the essence itself of terror in a totalitarian process.

A second general misconception refers to the moment in which terror becomes a reality in a totalitarian experience. The common argument is that it is not possible to speak about totalitarianism before reaching a situation of generalized terror. This interpretation is important to understand why the Venezuelan regime is often described in terms of a potential threat. Political leaders and analysts are always waiting for the action that will finally unveil the true nature of Chavez' regime. In Venezuela, every time that Chavez takes a step forward in his revolutionary process—e.g. imprisons opposition leaders elected for state and local government positions, intervenes private education or censors newspapers—Venezuelan leaders accept as inevitable what previously they had defined as the definitive step to totalitarianism. They then continue to use the conditional future tense when referring to the nature of the regime. At bottom, the reason for their willingness to allow the unacceptable lies in the generalized identification of totalitarianism with the holocaust paradigm: “the government is arbitrary, above the law, and continuously violates human rights, but it is not going around executing people like Hitler or Stalin did.” The problem with this diagnosis is that it inverts the order of events in a totalitarian experience. Friedrich, in his classic text on totalitarianism, explains that totalitarian terror increases in scope and violence in the same degree as the system becomes more stable and firm. Arendt, likewise, warns that terror is not essentially the means to intimidate and suppress opposition but that it rather increases when the opposition is weaker, reaches its climax when the opposition no longer exists, and unleashes all its fury not so much against the enemies of the revolution but against the people the regime had regarded as innocent: “the most characteristic aspect of totalitarian terror is that it unfolds when all organized opposition has been suppressed

³² See, for instance, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” in *The Review of Politics* 15, nº 3 (July, 1953): 303-327.

and the totalitarian leader knows that there is no longer any reason to be cautious.”³³ The substantive literature on totalitarianism draws from historical experience to demonstrate that totalitarian terror appears in fully consolidated regimes and becomes more brutal when it has managed to practically suppress every dissident voice. It is inaccurate, therefore, to define terror as the key element in the transition toward totalitarianism. On the contrary, only what is already totalitarian can generate the terror that is proper to its nature. In light of this fact, the characterization of Venezuela’s political crisis as undergoing a “regime with a totalitarian impulse” is misguided. It is analogous to defining as “cancerous impulse” the situation of a cancer patient prior to metastasis or before experiencing the most painful effects of the disease in its terminal stages.

What are some of the essential characteristics of totalitarian terror in its most recent manifestations? Certainly, they are not manifested in the fear to suffer torture, indiscriminate executions or mass deportations. The more brutal forms of repression seem impracticable in the present. Today, by virtue of the sinister capacity for adaptability of the totalitarian virus, the forms of oppression are more subtle and selective, focused rather in the sphere of “existential pressure.”³⁴ They are not restricted to the physical dimension of life, but rather emphasize its intellectual and moral dimensions. New totalitarian terror cannot be understood in the ordinary psychological sense of the term ‘terror’ as a sentiment or emotion characterized by an extreme fear. Rather, it relates to a much deeper fear difficult to circumscribe: a collective awareness of a permanent and ubiquitous danger; a state of anxiety regarding what is or could be threatened; a gradual disposition to accept living under threat as a substantive and inevitable part of reality; the resignation to surrender individuality as the only effective means for survival and self-preservation.³⁵ In order to produce a generalized state of terror, it is sufficient for the leader to create an atmosphere of continuous civil war, in which any individual or activity is equally vulnerable to be labeled as enemy of the process. A small private business, a radio station from an isolated rural area, a student in a small college, any person or activity, regardless of their level of public exposure, can at any moment be singled out as an enemy and, from that point onwards, find its existence seriously compromised. In order to be effective, the regime not only intimidates through threats, but permanently confirms through concrete acts that it counts with all the

³³ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 394.

³⁴ Václav Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” in *Open Letters*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 53.

³⁵ Idem.

resources of the state, including its weapons, to carry them to fruition. Every branch of government stays constantly prepared to swiftly carry out any order the leader may dictate for the defense of the revolution. Sometimes the order is not executed immediately, especially in cases that are so grossly arbitrary that it is difficult for cabinet members, judges, parliamentarians, or military officers to justify their legality. But they always manage to find a “legal” solution, only to boast about the time elapsed as evidence of independence and separation of powers. The messianic leader, in the meantime, demands more speed, warning against the dire consequences that befall those that are disloyal to the process.

Ultimately, totalitarian terror looks to break the will of human beings, until they surrender and adapt to what the revolution demands, especially, and this is the critical element, if this entails the sacrifice of their own moral convictions. In its deepest sense, there is totalitarian terror when a regime manages to force individuals to suppress their own conscience as the only reasonable option to continue with a “normal” life, regardless of whether they are adversaries or not, and independently from the specific methods the messianic leader chooses to use.

Terror is necessary for a totalitarian revolution because it constitutes the engine of its dynamic of movement. Its main purpose is to remove the obstacles to the forces of history so that the revolutionary ideal can unfold without impediments from spontaneous human action. More than capitalism or Yankee imperialism as roots of evil, human freedom is the ultimate source of all human suffering, the greatest injustice in God’s creation and, hence, the most critical barrier to remove.³⁶ Beyond the transformation of economic and social structures, the real challenge is to create a **new man** adapted to the revolutionary reconstruction of reality. This is the only way for the totalitarian revolution to repair the work of creation, experienced as intrinsically unjust. “I have my serious differences with God,” Chavez explains, “and that is why I prefer to follow Christ, but Christ the man, the revolutionary.”³⁷ Totalitarian terror, therefore, has a **therapeutic** dimension, directed to liberating man from his own created nature. Released from the possibility of choosing evil, the new man will find repose in the revolutionary truth. From the totalitarian

³⁶ This is the problem that Dostoevsky so admirably explores in “The Legend of the Gran Inquisitor,” a part of his novel Brothers Karamazov. On the manifestations of this rebellion at the core of the spiritual crisis of modernity and its link to the rise of totalitarian systems, see Henri de Lubac, The Drama of Atheist Humanism, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995); Jacques Maritain, Integral Humanism; and David Walsh, After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990).

³⁷ Hugo Chávez Frías, “Taller de Alto Nivel El Nuevo Mapa Estratégico” (Caracas: Colección de Intervenciones del Presidente de la República Hugo Chávez Frías, 2004), 17.

point of view, the fact that people are born and die remains an annoying interference in the dynamics of the process, since the possibility of a new beginning opens with the birth of each human being. Totalitarian terror, therefore, as the indispensable vehicle to accelerate the movement of history, seeks to liberate the process not only from concrete acts of freedom but from the origin itself of freedom in the life of a human being.³⁸ Sooner or later, totalitarian regimes recognize the need to intervene the educational process and prohibit religious life, not so much to indoctrinate children about the ideological principles of the revolution, which are non-existent as argued before, but to destroy their capacity to develop moral convictions and take moral choices guided by the light of their conscience.³⁹ In its most extreme expression, terror in the totalitarian experience does not point mainly to the savage acts that these movements perform to expand its domination, but to its ferrous determination to use political power to transfigure human nature and repair the created order of existence by means of the eschatological knowledge that the messianic leader has for leading society to the perfect realm of the final times.⁴⁰

The totalitarian impetus for the creation of a **second reality** is a direct consequence of the radical rebellion against the order of existence.⁴¹ Under normal circumstances, man recognizes that suffering, pain and injustice are inescapable realities in this “valley of tears,” and that, even if he does not understand, and even at times may raise his voice of despair, he recognizes that his fulfillment as a human being depends, in great measure, to the vital response he gives to this mystery of his existence. For the messianic leader, the load of existence loses its sense and becomes an absurd accident. His break, therefore, is not with reality itself but with the sense and meaning of such reality. He feels compelled to abandon an absurd reality in order to seek refuge in an imaginary world where perfection is possible. Reality, as it presents itself, does not conform to the harmonious patterns that his dream demands. Soon, therefore, the leader

³⁸ Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 312-13.

³⁹ In the educational reform project prepared by the Ministry of Education in 2002, the main purpose of education is defined as the “construction of a new political culture that guarantees the irreversibility of the revolutionary process.” Quoted by Juan Carlos Rey in “Estado, sociedad y educación en Venezuela.” The project condemns the traditional understating of individual liberty and questions the “so-called” right of individuals to the free development of their personality.

⁴⁰ Eric Voegelin, “The Oxford Political Philosophers,” in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol 11, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 24-46. See also Juan Carlos Rey, “Mito y Política: el caso de Chavez en Venezuela”, 17.

⁴¹ On the concept of second reality in the totalitarian spirit, see Eric Voegelin, “The Eclipse of Reality,” in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol 28, eds. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 111-162.

recognizes that a long and ambitious program of economic, social and legal reforms is insufficient to transform reality. Every reform will remain incomplete if it does not transfigure the understanding that man has about the meaning of his own existence. Revolutionary action, guided by the ideological dream, must modify human existence at this deeper level, so that by transforming the decisive nucleus in the conscience of man, the structure of the world can be re-created in perfection, in complete accordance with the paradisiacal sketch that the leader holds in his imagination. For the revolutionary paradise to appear feasible and the words of the messianic leader not discarded as mere nonsense, the leader must manage to eclipse our image of reality with a counter-image that meets two basic conditions: (1) it must encompass the whole of reality, so that its comprehensive character can seem as a plausible explanation of history; (b) it must be sufficiently obscure so that it is not easy to recognize the difference between reality and illusion.⁴² The magical act of transformation, therefore, consists in developing a linguistic and intellectual “**dictionary of the revolution**,” through which people begin to see the dream as a more elevated perception of reality until, gradually, the leader manages to dissociate every thought from concrete reality.

Totalitarian revolutions live in the imagination. Totalitarian leaders choose to **eclipse reality** and live a **second reality** by hiding and distorting the facts, manipulating social indicators, and inventing statistics. When actual events contradict the revolutionary vision, reality is forced to adjust to the truths conceived in the revolutionary imagination. “It did not happen” really means “it cannot happen”. The most important task for government officials is to continuously bend reality so that it adapts to the revolutionary vision. The second reality is so vivid in the revolutionary imagination that it is impossible to present any evidence against it. The malignant, in their wickedness, are unable to see the “true” reality, which is why they distort the facts. In democratic societies with a true public contest for political power, there are limits to the ability of governments to defend their performance through ideological discourse. In a totalitarian situation, a distorted and fantastic vision of reality acquires a formidable strength: it becomes the new reality and, in many respects, it becomes even more important than the actual reality it hides. At this point, the importance of events does not come from their actual meaning but from their location as milestones in the revolutionary process.

⁴² See Eric Voegelin, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol.12, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 315-375.

The will to transform the reality of actual events to the revolutionary vision has no limits. This is a decisive element that all substantive theories of totalitarianism define as a particularly terrifying dimension of the totalitarian spirit. Nothing can contradict the messianic vision of the leader. And this “nothing” includes human beings, regardless of whether they belong to the elect or not. Ultimately, the life of human beings is secondary to the goals of the revolutionary project.⁴³ And this is what the leader means when he repeats that “even with hunger, suffering and death we must continue our revolutionary process.” Above human beings, what truly matters is to maintain the process in movement toward the future realm of endless plenitude. At bottom, the revolutionary slogans are not an invitation to fight. They present, rather, a fundamental disjunctive for human existence, since they involve a threat against any determination to act according to conscience. When Chavez shouts “Country, Socialism or Death,” he compels man to surrender their own human existence in exchange for allowing their possibility to subsist.

The concatenation of the various coordinates of the totalitarian phenomenon, ordered according to the logic followed by messianic leaders of past revolutionary processes, should bring more clarity to the dynamics of Venezuela’s political situation during the decade of the Bolivarian Revolution.⁴⁴ More importantly, the consolidation of Chavez’ regime should raise awareness about its imminent potential for violence. This assertion is not just grounded in the theory revisited in this paper, but in the words of Chavez himself:

We have not come here to make superficial changes. We have to touch bottom and, beyond transforming economic, political and social structures, we must reach the moral and spiritual structure of human existence, to create a true society of equality and brotherhood...Everywhere we must smack the old ideas, strike them in the liver, in the chin, strike the old ways without mercy. If we do not, if we do not demolish them, they will demolish us sooner or later and then we would end our life like Christ and Don Quixote, the greatest fools of history...But this does not matter, because they did something great. They concluded the first stage of the process. Then winter came, everything froze but then the resurrection arrived and here we are, in the same battle...We must not make superficial changes, but transform man himself... We can do it and we have done it peacefully. Fortunately, without need to execute anybody, organize guerrillas, place bombs or massacre people. Let us hope that it may continue this way.⁴⁵

⁴³ Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 398.

⁴⁴ The following works are useful accounts of the main political events during the first ten years of the Bolivarian Revolution: Roberto Giusti, Los Años Duros (1989-2004) (Caracas: Editorial Libros Marcados, 2006) and Con la Frente en Alto - Los Años Duros 2(2005-2006) (Caracas: Editorial Libros Marcados, 2006); Armando Duran, Venezuela en Llamas (Caracas: Editorial Melvin, 2004).

⁴⁵ Hugo Chávez Frías, “Taller de Alto Nivel El Nuevo Mapa Estratégico”, 81 (underline mine).