

Beyond Tyranny: The Totalitarian Spirit of the Venezuelan Regime

Francisco Plaza

Palm Beach Atlantic University

Introduction

It has been almost twenty years since the “Bolivarian Revolution” raised Hugo Chávez to political power in Venezuela. Now that the magnitude of the nation’s crisis has reached indescribable levels, and chilling statistics reflect the plummeting of every political, economic, and social indicator, many people are asking how one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America, possessing the largest oil reserves in the world, could descend to such a level of humanitarian crisis. Most answers dwell on government inefficiency and corruption, misguided economic policies, or weak institutional and legal frameworks. Others attribute the essence of this revolution to the populist demagoguery of shrewd politicians or resort to euphemistic characterizations such as “competitive autocracy.” Some analyses look to distinguish between Chávez and Maduro, arguing that the dictatorial practices of the successor have derailed the “democratic revolution” initiated by the *comandante eterno*, the eternal commander. All of these answers, however, only scratch the surface of a tragedy that is substantially more complex. Even the harshest of labels, such as despotism, dictatorship, and tyranny, fail to capture the actual essence of the Bolivarian Revolution—totalitarianism.

The inability—or unwillingness—to comprehend the crisis in Venezuela stems from several causes, but one of them is certainly the proclivity to avoid or reject, almost *a priori*, any analysis pointing toward the totalitarian spirit of the Venezuelan regime. The notion that totalitarianism is now a useless political category, no

longer applicable to any present reality, is unfortunately widespread among academics, despite the warnings of various political philosophers who experienced first-hand the rigors of totalitarian regimes. Karl Jaspers, for instance, recalling the self-deception that blinded many of the German people in the early 1930s, convinced as they were that National Socialism would never triumph in Germany, warned the contemporary world against believing that “any nation is proof against giving birth to the same evil, even though in other ways and in a different spirit.”¹ Totalitarianism, Jaspers wrote, “wherever, in whichever form, it appears, is like the virus of a pernicious disease that grows wild and consumes anyone who contracts it.”² “This Proteus,” he added, “who keeps appearing in ever new masks . . . is like a soulless, daemonic something which seizes everybody—those who drift into it blindly as well as those who half-knowingly bring it about.”³

Indeed, the categorization of Venezuela's political regime is not a vain theoretical exercise. As Hannah Arendt and later Václav Havel pointedly affirmed, totalitarianism involves an understanding of reality with which it is simply impossible to coexist.⁴ Furthermore, as Jaspers noted, “events in all totalitarian regimes have taught us that an absolute dictatorship, once in the saddle, can no longer be unseated from within.”⁵ This essay, therefore, revisits the substantive theories on totalitarianism 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 true nature and destructive potential of its current regime.

Chávez's political discourse, as is now the case with his successor Maduro, was always strikingly straightforward. It is relatively easy to choose almost any of his speeches to identify the totalitarian spirit that animates his revolution. In a particularly relevant instance, however, Chávez laid out his “strategic map” to reassure the members of his party that the revolution was on the right track. It is only through the grid of the essential coordinates of the totalitarian phenomenon that it is possible to unpack the crude reality that lay condensed at the core of Chávez's political discourse.

The grounds of such a conclusion should become clear from an analysis of the most revealing statements Chávez delivered on that occasion. For readers unfamiliar with the rhetoric of Chávez, I include the following statements from this speech, which includes what I will subsequently unpack as the six essential coordinates of totalitarianism.

It is not true that politics is the art of the possible. Politics is the art of making possible tomorrow what today is impossible. This is politics and, especially, revolutionary politics. . . . We have not come here to make superficial changes. 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 order, strike it 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. . . . This new profound battle is just beginning, and the enemy remains intact, occupying its positions. We are an army deployed in battle. . . .

I feel the need to eradicate evil. . . . At times I enter into profound conflict with God, which is why I believe much more in Christ, but Christ the human being, Christ the man. . . . In this new stage, whoever is not with me is against me. We need everyone to give themselves completely, body and soul, to the Bolivarian revolutionary process. . . . Whoever does not feel truly identified with this revolutionary project must stand ready to face the consequences. . . . We have to demolish the old order. This includes every sphere of reality, everything, everything, everything. . . . Let no one think that we are invulnerable. Let no one think that the enemy is retreating. No, the enemy is here. Always, then, we must continue our offensive and keep the enemy from regrouping. And if they do regroup, we must attack and harass them relentlessly. . . .

If we fail 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. . . . We never had doubts about our final goal, but whether to achieve this goal through peaceful means or armed rebellion was a matter of debate for several years. . . . We can do it and we can do it peacefully. . . . We must not make superficial changes, but transform man himself. . . . We can do it, fortunately, without need to execute anybody, organize guerrillas, place bombs, or massacre people. *Let us hope that it may continue this way.*⁶

This speech, with all its incendiary rhetoric, contains the key components of the Bolivarian Revolution—components that add up to what I interpret as the essential coordinates of totalitarianism: millenarianism, messianism, eschatology, gnosticism, pseudo-religion, and nihilism.

The substantive theories of totalitarianism explore the phenomenon of radical rebellion against the way in which most people in Western civilization have come to understand the relationship between man and politics. In this tradition, a most fundamental principle is that politics, from the point of view of its ends, is always limited by the fact that it can never deliver everything that human beings need for their fulfillment. 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. Even if it is extremely successful in achieving these goals, however, 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, every human being is called to 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 in 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 totality from politics, rejecting any notion that includes any limits on political power or authority, especially those limits drawn by the distinction between the things of Caesar and the things of God, a most essential defining attribute of the Western Christian tradition. The more concrete ways of applying this unlimited understanding of politics vary according to historical circumstances, but, ultimately, the various manifestations of this totality 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 texts 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. If I am correct in my interpretation of the Bolivarian Revolution as a new manifestation of totalitarianism, then it is not only appropriate but necessary to return to the substantive theories of totalitarianism offered by such thinkers as Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin, Carl Friedrich, Hermann Rauschning, and Václav Havel, all of whom have helped us recognize the distinctiveness of this novel form of political tyranny.

My argument will unfold with an elaboration of the millenarian, messianic, eschatological, gnostic, pseudo-religious, and nihilistic coordinates of totalitarianism that are so evident in Chávez's political discourse. I will then explore Chávez's self-consciousness of his historical role as a prophetic, messianic leader of universal dimension. A general difficulty in recognizing the totalitarian spirit of the Bolivarian Revolution arises from the ability of its leaders to conceal their autocratic practices and lust for power behind formal democratic procedures and a message that constantly evokes the Christian concept of love for the poor. I will, therefore, expose the

real meaning of “law” and “morality” in the Bolivarian revolutionary process, following Arendt’s distinction between lawless, unprincipled tyranny and the relentless proclamation of legal and ethical principles in totalitarianism. Finally, I turn to the experience of terror in Venezuela. The absence of mass executions and concentration camps in this country should not prevent us from realizing the crucial role that terror plays, along with its concomitant eclipse of reality, as an engine of the Bolivarian Revolution’s unyielding determination to force human beings into its revolutionary dream. I will conclude this essay with some reflections on what I consider to be the essential first step in the search for ways to finally bring to a close a tragedy that must no longer be permitted to continue.

A Millenarian Battle for the Eschatological Redemption of Mankind

It is not true that politics is the art of the possible. Politics is the art of making possible tomorrow what today is impossible. This is politics and, especially, revolutionary politics.⁷

A millenarian perspective of politics is the fundamental coordinate around which the substantive theories of totalitarianism converge.⁸ From such a perspective, political power is not exercised to improve this or that aspect of society, to secure better conditions for justice and material well-being, or to attend to the most urgent needs of society. The totalitarian spirit points well beyond such 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. Because 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, Chávez often asked, when its purpose is

precisely to transform society to eradicate every injustice and lead the people toward a future of perfect fulfillment. At bottom, the totalitarian spirit rebels against the agony that always accompanies human existence. From a millenarian perspective, everything, ultimately, becomes subordinate to the duty of politics—to secure human happiness.⁹

Political messianism is a distinctive element of the totalitarian spirit. Such arises from its characteristic postulate—a state of perfect harmony toward which man is irresistibly driven once a political movement assumes the commitment to redeem man from the sources of evil in human history. The *polis*, therefore, becomes the sole and exclusive plane of reality because 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 human life. In light of this immense 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.

*We have not come here to make superficial changes. 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.*¹⁰

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 overarching evil that underlies all particular evils. True politics, therefore, consists of 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 is itself the culmination of its history. Politics becomes the scenario for the decisive battle that will usher in a future of unending perfection.¹¹ In the eschatology of the totalitarian spirit, all past time was simply a preparation for this moment of radical conversion. After the totalitarian ideology has offered a glimpse of the glorious age to come, it is impossible to move backward. 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.

*Everywhere we must smack the old order, strike it 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. . . . This new profound battle is just beginning, and the enemy remains intact, occupying its positions. We are an army deployed in battle.*¹²

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. 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 utterly annihilated. For this conversion from evil to goodness to be complete and radical, the revolution must therefore destroy. 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 total war, military terms are most appropriate to describe the substance of revolutionary politics. Totalitarian activists classify the course of historical events in terms of tactics, counter-attacks, strategic

movements, pyrrhic victories, decisive battles, and so forth.¹³ In this state of constant existential bellicosity, each and every sphere of activity in society is appropriated to the revolutionary struggle. The most ordinary activities of everyday life, even the most trivial, must be re-interpreted from the perspective of the immense struggle. The magnitude of the battle is such that it demands the total mobilization of all the nation's resources.¹⁴ Only thus can the nation achieve the essential unity decisive for victory. Gradually, every intermediate group in society is absorbed into the regime's gargantuan task of building the future, with the state gradually becoming the only valid reference for the individual.

*I feel the need to eradicate evil.*¹⁵

The goals of the revolutionary struggle are conceived as feasible. 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 somewhere in the current structure of society. This is the gnostic coordinate of the totalitarian spirit.¹⁶ The totalitarian leader not only knows the fundamental evil that underlies every particular evil but has also found the magical formula to eradicate it, transforming the structures of society 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 hermeneutical 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 requisite knowledge—and determination—to prevail over evil.

*At times I enter into profound conflict with God, which is why I believe much more in Christ, but Christ the human being, Christ the man.*¹⁷

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 of 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. Albert 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.¹⁸

A Pseudo-Religious Myth of Nihilistic Destruction

*In this new stage, whoever is not with me is against me. We need everyone to give himself completely, body and soul, to the Bolivarian revolutionary process. . . . Whoever does not feel truly identified with this revolutionary project must stand ready to face the consequences.*¹⁹

The next coordinate of the totalitarian spirit uncovers the language of the elect. Only those who have undergone the revolutionary conversion can recognize goodness. Whoever does not share this vision simply remains evil. The revolution that splits history in two

also separates the people: a city of the elect and a city of the wicked. The supporters of the revolution are the elect, regardless of their moral behavior, because their actions can always be judged in light of that ulterior reality which only few are yet able to perceive with clarity. In the city of the wicked remain those who refuse to accept the revolutionary truth. A perverse 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 opponents by some perverse motive underlying their 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,” as Chávez repeatedly insisted. While the elect find sanctification by giving themselves wholeheartedly to the totalitarian ideal, demoniacal forces always drive the wicked in their malevolent plots to destroy it. The elect dream a future of love and solidarity, but the wicked only conspire to impose their selfishness and greed. The passion for unanimity fuels the pseudo-religious fervor of totalitarian movements.²⁰ Those who dissent from the totalitarian ideal are guilty of a terrible offense because they constitute obstacles to the path toward fulfillment. The wicked must be converted, or simply removed, because 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 wicked. 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 various means the wicked use to confuse and distort reality, mainly, the family, church, private education, and the media. The certainty of possessing 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 that claim a 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 nevertheless the aim to eventually achieve unanimity around the revolutionary truth. In the society of the future, everyone will rejoice together in the truth proclaimed by their prophetic, messianic leader.

*We have to demolish the old order. This includes every sphere of reality, everything, everything, everything. . . . Let no one think that we are invulnerable. Let no one think that the enemy is retreating. No, the enemy is here. Always, then, we must continue our offensive and keep the enemy from regrouping. And if they do regroup, we must attack and harass them relentlessly.*²¹

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 equality means in a classless society or what justice would be in the society envisioned by the “socialism of the twenty-first 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.²² 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 maintained at all costs. For Chávez, the revolution may not have arrived at its goal, but by destroying the evil structures of the past it is certainly moving in the right direction. To maintain dynamic movement, the totalitarian leader thus always needs a conflict, a threat, something that needs to be demolished. This is what really animates the revolutionary process. Calmness, order, and stability

are mortal enemies to the vitality of the movement 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 fierce discourse is more conducive to this end because 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.”²³ Totalitarian movements, therefore, are revolutions without a coherent body of principles. They are movements that maintain their vitality as long as they manage to generate enthusiasm, which arises from the feeling of empowerment that comes from participating actively in the process of destruction. Totalitarian processes are the denial and absence of any positive affirmation because their determination to *un-do* everything is what truly defines their nihilistic essence. Paradoxically, this lack of principles is one of the main secrets of their effectiveness: as permanent revolutions, they are impossible to bring to a close.²⁴ As the Venezuelan political philosopher Juan Carlos Rey explains, “for Chávez, his revolution, unlike the typical revolutions in Latin America, is a continuous and progressive process that develops indefinitely in time. Chávez recalls Trotsky when he explains that this is a ‘permanent revolution, by which the original constitutional power—the revolutionary power—is permanently alive.’”²⁵

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. According to Sorel, a myth, unlike an ideology, 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 of generating within a certain group in 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. “Chávez’s discourse,” Juan Carlos Rey explains, “was mainly oriented toward 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.”²⁶ The function of the myth is to produce a state of conscience properly disposed to the destruction of the existing order, even in the absence of an alternative vision. The totalitarian myth, unlike a utopian ideology, is eminently negative because it consists of the transformation of reality through its radical destruction. Because 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 an intellectual act but the vital disposition of the will to participate heroically in the destructive action of the present.²⁷ 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. Through carefully chosen symbols, the totalitarian myth awakens the deepest instincts of a people, intensifying emotions, hatreds, resentments, and hopes. Always directed against an enemy (e.g., Jews, capitalists, imperialists), the myth typically 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 who do

not share the myth: The wicked opponents are also traitors who despise their country.

Closely linked to the totalitarian myth, therefore, 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.

The Universal Dimension of Chávez's Messianic Leadership

*If we fail 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.*²⁸

The figure of a messianic leader, in charge of delivering the country, occupies the center of the totalitarian process.²⁹ The leader 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 words and vision of the prophet.

The messianic leader is fanatically convinced of 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.³⁰ 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 because 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 a line of hereditary succession with the great figures of history so that he can also hold his title as prophet of his century.³¹

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 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 these menial tasks. The leader reminds his people that he has no responsibility over these trivial matters by protesting on behalf of the people, with even greater 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 perverse 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, because 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 who 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 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 some hidden secret of his infinite love in an atmosphere of intimate reflection. In the same speech he unexpectedly moves from one style to the other to show 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 to 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 by arguing that it is the sacrifice that corresponds to his immense dignity, superhuman mission, and historic responsibility. The leader, like the Sun King, surrounds his being with an aura of mystery to help his people realize the infinite distance that separates him from ordinary human beings. His luxurious and extravagant 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.³² Heinz Dieterich, a German scholar who wrote extensively in praise of Chávez's revolution, described the universality of the Bolivarian Revolution in the following terms: "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 Chávez not only transcends the geo-political scope of Simón Bolívar's liberation praxis but extends, objectively, to the likeness of Napoléon Bonaparte. . . . [Through] this 'universal spirit' . . . in a beautiful dawn, man becomes a self-determining agent of the post-bourgeois society."³³

Totalitarian activists refuse to circumscribe the goodness of the revolutionary ideal and the promise of future plenitude to such a small country as Venezuela. It is selfish to deny other people the heroic leadership and prophetic vision of their leader. The

revolution thus extends its arms, conscious that the division between the elect and the wicked also applies to the other peoples and countries 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 their 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 totalitarian discourse. Blunt, vulgar, and threatening statements, which under different circumstances would have constituted *casus belli* for any nation that respects itself, are welcomed and celebrated as acts of courageous sincerity.³⁴ 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 do 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, insofar as they 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 wicked, in their greed and selfishness, are unable to understand the boundless generosity of the revolutionary process.

The Meaning of “Law” and “Morality” in the Bolivarian Revolution

One of the main obstacles to recognizing the totalitarian nature of a regime is the subject of legality. Totalitarian regimes are

autocracies in the classic sense of the term: all the branches and institutions of government 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 a scrupulous regard for the formal application of the law. Every action is based on some statute or decree, in accordance with 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 phenomenon. Totalitarian regimes place us in the difficult situation of explaining the paradox of an autocratic ruler who scrupulously follows the "law." This is why it is necessary to distinguish between legality and autocratic legalism and establish the difference between the traditional meaning of law and the distorted ideological sense of the term employed by totalitarian regimes.³⁵

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. This situation, however, 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 law 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 justly 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.³⁶ 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 revolutionary process. The totalitarian leader is convinced of having

finally reached the actual foundation of the authority that brings legitimacy to 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 push the movement of history in accordance with the revolutionary formula and removes the obstacles in the path to redemption. In the totalitarian context, therefore, the term "law" has a specific meaning: it does not express a general framework of stability within which human activity can take place, but it is rather the expression of a movement. Legal is whatever helps maintain and drive the dynamics of the process toward the historical objective of the revolution, and illegal is anything that may halt or obstruct that process.³⁷

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.³⁸ 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 to be simple cynicism we find the will to judge the ethical value of human acts according to their degree 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 to the revolutionary struggle.

In the totalitarian revision of the moral code, the lowest human passions are exalted to exploit rancor, envy, division, and hatred among 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 offering resistance to good, tempting people to allow exploitation once more to prevail. When, by contrast, 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.

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 proportion to the worst instances of violence and repression. By “sincerely” revealing the secrets of his system, the leader explains how “his hatred is grounded in love.” As Juan Carlos Rey explains:

The repeated and often exaggerated expressions of love for all fellow human beings that, as [Chávez] constantly underlines, inspire his whole life, does not keep him from frequently unleashing all his ire against his political enemies, whom 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 Chávez’s 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.³⁹

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 contributing to changes in public opinion.⁴⁰ Situations that would produce severe crises for democratic governments have very little effect on the perception of the people. Nothing is predictable any longer because the totalitarian virus destroys the essential conditions for rational persuasion.

**Terror and the Creation of the New Man in of the
Bolivarian Revolution**

*We never had doubts about our final goal, but whether to achieve this goal through peaceful means or armed violence was a matter of debate for several years. . . . We can do it peacefully.*⁴¹

Terror is as an essential characteristic of the totalitarian reality. This is perhaps the most complex element of the totalitarian phenomenon and, certainly, the one most often misunderstood. The Nazi concentration camps or the Soviet gulags are usually but mistakenly the general paradigm informing the minds of those who refuse to apply the term “totalitarian” to Venezuela’s current regime. Hannah Arendt, in her classic text *Origins of Totalitarianism*, published for the first time in 1951, argued that totalitarian rule, as distinguished from a totalitarian movement, is only possible in countries with a population large enough to allow the extermination of a considerable part of the populace.⁴² In the 1958 edition, however, Arendt refined her concept about the nature of terror in a totalitarian reality.⁴³ Mass extermination was, indeed, the cruel method that Hitler and Stalin used to generate terror. But other totalitarian regimes 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 of terror within the 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 misinterpretation explains 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 Venezuela’s regime. Every time that Chávez did, and Maduro now does, take steps forward in the revolutionary process, opposition leaders and foreign governments rush to downplay such actions as merely new “signs of concern,” even when previously they had warned that those very actions would constitute a definitive transition to totalitarianism. International organizations like the Organization of American States or the European Parliament persist in using the conditional future tense in their political resolutions. The problem with this assessment is that it inverts the order of events in a totalitarian experience. Carl 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.⁴⁴ Arendt, likewise, warns that terror is not essentially the means to intimidate and suppress opposition. 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 previously regarded as innocent: “The most characteristic aspect of totalitarian terror is that it unfolds when all organized opposition has been suppressed and the totalitarian leader knows that there is no longer any reason to be cautious.”⁴⁵ 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 suppress practically all dissident voices. 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 a

“regime with a totalitarian impulse” is misguided. It is analogous to defining the situation of a cancer patient prior to metastasis or before experiencing the most painful effects of the disease in its terminal stages as “cancerous impulse.”

What are some of the essential characteristics of totalitarian terror in its most recent manifestations? Certainly, there is no longer a widespread threat of deportation, torture, or execution. These more brutal forms of repression seem impracticable in the present. Today, by virtue of the sinister adaptive capacity of the totalitarian virus, the forms of oppression are more subtle and selective, focused rather in the sphere of “existential pressure.”⁴⁶ They are not restricted to the physical dimension of life, but rather encompass 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, as Havel accurately explained, it relates to a much deeper fear that is 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.⁴⁷ To produce a generalized state of terror, it is sufficient for the leader to create an atmosphere of continuous civil war, an environment in which any individual or activity is equally vulnerable to be labeled an 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 onward, find its existence seriously compromised. To be effective, the regime not only intimidates through threats but permanently confirms through concrete acts that it intends, with all the resources of the state, including its weapons, to carry them to fruition.

Ultimately, totalitarian terror seeks 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 betrayal of their own moral convictions. In its deepest sense, totalitarian terror exists when a regime manages to force individuals to suppress their own conscience as the only reasonable option for those who wish to continue with a “normal” life, regardless of whether they are adversaries, and independently from the specific methods the messianic leader chooses to use.

*We must not make superficial changes, but transform man himself.*⁴⁸

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. Capitalism and Yankee imperialism are of course conceived as roots of evil that must be overcome, but the actual and fundamental root of evil lies deeper: human freedom is regarded as the ultimate source of all human suffering, the greatest injustice in God’s creation and, hence, the most critical barrier to remove.⁴⁹ 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. Totalitarian terror thus has a therapeutic dimension, directed toward 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 point of view, the fact that people are born and die remains an annoying interference with the dynamics of the process because 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 of freedom itself—the life of a human being.⁵⁰ Sooner or later, totalitarian regimes recognize the need to intervene in the educational process and prohibit religious life, not so much to indoctrinate children

about the ideological principles of the revolution, which, as discussed, are non-existent, but to destroy their capacity to develop moral convictions and make moral choices guided by the light of their conscience.⁵¹ In its most extreme expression, terror in the totalitarian experience does not point mainly to the savage acts that these movements perform to expand their domination, but to their furious determination to use political power to transfigure human nature. Only thus can they repair the created order of existence by means of the eschatological knowledge possessed by the messianic leader, which enables him to lead society to the perfect realm of the final times.⁵²

The totalitarian impetus for the creation of a second reality is a direct consequence of its radical rebellion against the order of existence.⁵³ Under normal circumstances, man recognizes that suffering, pain, and injustice are inescapable realities in this "vale of tears," and that, even if he does not understand, and perhaps at times raises a voice of despair, he recognizes that his fulfillment as a human being depends, in great measure, to the vital response he gives to the 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 to seek refuge in an imaginary world where perfection is possible. Reality, as it presents itself, does not conform to the harmonious pattern that his dream demands. Soon the leader recognizes that a long and ambitious program of economic, social, and legal reform is insufficient to transform reality. Every reform will remain incomplete if it does not transfigure the understanding 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 recreated in perfection, in complete accordance with the paradisiacal sketch the leader holds in his imagination. As Voegelin explained, for the revolutionary paradise to appear feasible and for the words of the messianic leader not to be discarded as mere

nonsense, the leader must manage to eclipse man's image of reality with a counter-image that meets two basic conditions: (a) it must encompass the whole of reality, so that its comprehensive character can seem as a plausible explanation of history; and (b) it must be sufficiently obscure so that it is not easy to recognize the difference between reality and illusion.⁵⁴ The magical act of transformation, therefore, consists of developing a linguistic and intellectual "revolutionary vision" 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 wicked, in their perversity, 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 or propaganda. In a totalitarian situation, a distorted and fantastic vision of reality acquires a formidable strength: it becomes the new reality and, in many respects, even more important than the actual reality it obscures. At this point, the importance of events does not come from their actual meaning but from their location as milestones in the revolutionary process.

Conclusion

*We can do it, fortunately, without need to execute anybody, organize guerrillas, place bombs, or massacre people. Let us hope that it may continue this way.*⁵⁵

The drive to transform the reality of actual events in accord with the revolutionary vision has no limits. This is the decisive element that all substantive theories of totalitarianism define as the most 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. Ultimately, the life of human beings is secondary to the goals of the revolutionary project.⁵⁶ This is what Chávez would always remind his people, by insisting that even with hunger, suffering, and death, his revolutionary process always had to continue. Above human beings, what truly matters is to maintain the 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 because they involve a threat against any determination to act according to conscience. When Chávez shouted “Country, socialism, or death,” he was compelling each person to surrender his or her own human existence in exchange for allowing the possibility of living a tranquil life.

In the statement quoted above, Chávez says that his revolution had advanced peacefully, “without need to execute anybody, organize guerrillas, place bombs, or massacre people,” before warning, in a premonitory way: “Let us hope that it may continue this way.” Ever since Maduro rose to power following Chávez’s death, the nightmare of Chávez’s “premonition” has become all too real for the Venezuelan people. Since 2014, the nation has endured countless acts of repression, torture, and arbitrary imprisonments in the midst of a humanitarian crisis that the regime insists on denying. Despite such denial, the actual cost of the sacrifice includes victims numbering in the hundreds of thousands, victims suffering from both hunger and the lack of the most basic medical products and health services.⁵⁷ The diagnosis of the essential coordinates of the totalitarian spirit should alert us to the fact that the Venezuelan regime will continue to unleash, and even more brutally, its unlimited will to destroy. As far-fetched as it may sound, there is such a thing as the death of a nation.

To avoid such an end, we must hope that both the leaders and the people of Venezuela, as well as the governments in the

Americas, will awaken to the lie of totalitarianism. As the crisis in Venezuela becomes ever more desperate, and its dramatic effects begin to spill over into the entire South American region, there is a growing consensus about the urgent need to find ways to bring this tragedy to an end. Such efforts, however, will remain lukewarm and palliative at best as long as the failure to grasp the totalitarian nature of Venezuela's regime continues. Targeted economic sanctions and carefully worded political condemnations or exhortations will accomplish little, if anything, as long as the Venezuelan totalitarian regime is not recognized—and confronted—for what it truly is. Clarity about the nature of the totalitarian virus is the only real weapon, Jaspers warned, because "totalitarianism only vanishes in the pure air of clear vision." Venezuelan resistance leaders, in particular, must come to recognize that totalitarianism is "the one maximal threat, which [will] obliterate our spiritual life and our moral substance along with our political existence."⁵⁸

Notes

1. Karl Jaspers, "The Fight against Totalitarianism," in *Philosophy and the World—Selected Essays* (Washington D.C.: Gateway Editions, 1963), p. 68.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.
4. See Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), p. 392; Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in *Open Letters*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 127–32.
5. Jaspers, p. 72.
6. Hugo Chávez Frías, *Taller de Alto Nivel El Nuevo Mapa Estratégico* (Caracas: Colección de Intervenciones del Presidente de la República Hugo Chávez Frías, 2004), pp. 11–81 (emphasis added).
7. Chávez, p. 76.
8. 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).
9. For the definition of politics based on the concept of a “realizable utopia” in the founding documents of the Bolivarian Revolution, see Alberto Garrido, *Documentos de la Revolución Bolivariana* (Caracas: author edition, 2002).
 10. Chávez, p. 81.
 11. On the eschatological coordinate in the totalitarian spirit, see Waldemar Gurian, “Totalitarian Religions,” *The Review of Politics* 14, no. 1 (January 1952): pp. 3–14; Hans Maier, “Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships: ‘Totalitarianism’ and ‘Political Religions’,” in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, ed. Hans Maier (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 199–215; Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 1968).
 12. Chávez, pp. 16–17.
 13. Sigmund Neumann, “The Rule of the Demagogue,” *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 4 (August 1938): p. 491.
 14. 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 Religions*, ed. Hans Maier (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 293–311. Also, Hans Barth, “Reality and Ideology of the Totalitarian State,” *The Review of Politics* 1, no. 3 (July 1939): pp. 275–306.
 15. Chávez, p. 16. Here, Chávez was reflecting on the dialogue between the member of the Convention and the Bishop in Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Chapter X (“The Bishop in the presence of an unknown light.”)
 16. On the gnostic coordinate in the totalitarian spirit, see especially Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 83–114.
 17. Chávez, p. 17.
 18. 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,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 2 (May 1964): pp. 109–26.
 19. Chávez, p. 12.
 20. See Carl J. Friedrich, “The Deification of the State,” *The Review of Politics* 1, no. 1 (January 1939): pp. 18–30; Gurian, “Totalitarian Religions,” pp. 3–14.
 21. Chávez, p. 47.
 22. 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," *The Review of Politics* 26, no. 4 (October 1964): pp. 473–504.
23. Rauschning, p. 23.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
 25. "Mito y Política: el caso de Chávez en Venezuela," in *Actualidad de las formas irracionales de integración política*, eds. Juan Carlos Rey and Guillermo Tell Avello (Caracas: Fundación Manuel García Pelayo, 2009), p. 19.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 27. 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), pp. 475–96.
 28. Chávez, pp. 17, 27.
 29. 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), pp. 17–26. Also, Denis de Rougemont, "Passion and the Origin of Hitlerism," *The Review of Politics* 3, no. 1 (January, 1941): pp. 65–82.
 30. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 407.
 31. In the Venezuelan case, the leader consummates in the twenty-first century the redemption work that his predecessors began in the nineteenth century (Simón Bolívar) and twentieth Century (Fidel Castro). Chávez gradually chose 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).
 32. On the universal coordinate in the totalitarian spirit, see Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). Also, Waldemar Gurian, "Totalitarian Religions," pp. 3–14.
 33. *Hugo Chávez y el Socialismo del Siglo XXI* (Buenos Aires: Nuestra América, 2005), pp. 17–19.
 34. Friedrich and Brzezinski, p. 58.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 36. For a detailed and thorough description of how the Bolivarian revolution dismantled Venezuela's democratic institutions and the rule of law

- through “legal procedures,” see Allan R. Brewer-Carías, *Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
37. See Hannah Arendt, “Authority in the Twentieth Century,” *The Review of Politics* 18, no. 4 (October 1956): pp. 403–17.
 38. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 303.
 39. “Mito y Política: el caso de Chávez en Venezuela,” p. 20.
 40. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 457–70.
 41. Chávez, pp. 19, 81.
 42. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 414.
 43. In the 1958 edition, Arendt replaced the last chapter entitled “Concluding Remarks” with a revised version of her article “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 3 (July 1953): pp. 303–27. In this new chapter, Arendt explains that “terror in totalitarian government has ceased to be a mere means for the suppression of all opposition. . . . Terror becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition.” *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 599.
 44. See Friedrich and Brzezinski, pp. 293–303.
 45. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 394.
 46. Václav Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” in *Open Letters*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 53.
 47. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
 48. Chávez, p. 17.
 49. This is the problem that Dostoevsky explores in “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.” 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, *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*, Vol. 11, ed. Otto Bird, *Integral Humanism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); David Walsh, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990).
 50. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 312–13.
 51. In the educational reform project prepared by the Venezuelan 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. The project condemns the traditional understating of individual liberty and questions the “so-called” right of individuals to the free development of their personality.
 52. Eric Voegelin, “The Oxford Political Philosophers,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 11, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO:

- University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 24–46. See also Juan Carlos Rey, “Mito y Política: el caso de Chávez en Venezuela”, p. 17.
53. 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, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 111–62.
54. See Eric Voegelin, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 315–75.
55. Chávez, p. 81.
56. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 398.
57. For a well-documented and detailed catalogue of human rights violations by the Maduro regime, the reports prepared by Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the Organization of American States, are an invaluable reference. These reports, available in the OAS website (www.oas.org), were also published by the Democratic Initiative of Spain and the Americas (IDEA) as *La Crisis de la Democracia, la OEA y la Carta Democrática Interamericana – Documentos de Luis Almagro 2015–2017* (Caracas: Editorial Jurídica Venezolana Internacional, 2017).
58. Jaspers, pp. 83–85.