

Democratization



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metaphorical sense-, will the people undertake the long task of building the country again.

Nonetheless, this essay proposes some considerations to rebuild the nation: reconstruction is not a consequence of, but rather a condition for the regime's demise. As indicated in the title, it is to be a *post-totalitarian* reconstruction. The usage of this adjective denotes the challenge to rebuild upon the destruction that even exceeds the material and institutional devastation of the country. Its real core lies in the spirit, because what totalitarianism ultimately corrodes is a shared vision of what is good and just that constitutes our nation. Only a nation united in goodness and justice can overcome the evil that a totalitarian regime sows. The material reconstruction of the country, therefore, will be impossible without first reconstituting the spirit of the nation. The task of recovering its *ethos* is thus even more urgent, and perhaps even more arduous, than the immense labor of reconstructing material goods.

A revolution of nihilism

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties of confronting the horror of the Bolivarian Revolution has been the reluctance to fully acknowledge the evil it embodies. Euphemisms used early on such as "competitive autocracy", "authoritarian populism", "regime with a democratic deficit" or "semi-democracy", which diminished and allowed to ignore the signs of the regime's totalitarian vocation, are mostly -and it is incredible that not yet totally- a thing of the past. The great oil boom experienced during its first years allowed the regime to finance its lies in order to maintain popular support, and thus certainly made it difficult for the people to recognize that, from its very inception -as soon

as Chávez swore on a “moribund constitution”-, the seed of totalitarianism was sown. In accordance with the dynamics of the totalitarian virus, however, it was only a matter of time before the revolution displayed the most terrible signs of its perverse identity with all its fury. Hannah Arendt¹ stated that the road towards totalitarian domination goes through many intermediate stages, and all its cruelty is unfolded only when it has nothing to fear. It is therefore not a matter of whether the course of the Bolivarian Revolution has been distorted or deviated by the successor of the late messianic leader. On the contrary, the Revolution has followed its natural trajectory -the “process”, as they call it- by virtue of its essence as a project of total domination. In simpler words, the Bolivarian Revolution is today what it always was, only at a later stage of its development.

Among the current devastation and the undeniable cruelty with which the regime violates the most essential rights of Venezuelans, those euphemisms -which I insist have not completely disappeared- have given way to characterizations that, even though are more severe, do not yet fully reflect Venezuela’s decay in all its complexity. It is true that the regime is a “failed State” because it lacks legitimacy and the control of the entire national territory, it shares a monopoly on the use of violence with irregular groups (*colectivos*), and it does not guarantee the most basic material necessities of the population. It is also true that it is a “criminal or gangster” regime, since it uses the structures and mechanisms of State powers to organize crime. This label suggests that the problem is different from that of corrupt governments. The activity of a “criminal State” focuses precisely on using its structures and powers to organize and

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 2004), 567.

decide on the most effective ways to achieve its criminal purposes, up to the point where the only truly profitable activities are illicit ones. Characterizing it as a “narco-State” evidences that the regime’s favored criminal activities are related to drug trafficking and commercialization, and money laundering. Another common classification is “terrorist State”, which refers to two realities: one stresses the fact that the regime provides financial and logistical support to international terrorist organizations; the other, the fact that the regime uses fear and intimidation –terror itself– as an instrument to control citizens and intermediate groups in society.

All these terms uncover one or another aspect of the regime, but none, even if referenced together, is able to fully convey the nature of the characteristic destruction of a totalitarian regime. It is a serious mistake to attribute the demolition of Venezuela to the irresponsibility, ignorance or improvisation of those in charge of the government apparatus. It is beyond doubt that these defects abound in the official nomenclature. However, the problem is still much more acute since the destruction is continuous and deliberate. The nature of this destruction cannot be contained by the terms “failed”, “gangster”, “narco-criminal”, or “terrorist”.

When the term “totalitarianism” was introduced and developed by political philosophy in the 20th century, it sought to describe the nature of a new autocratic form of government that could not be explained with the traditional concepts of tyranny and dictatorship and, especially, which could arise in any country for being specifically linked to the spiritual crisis of modernity. The theory of totalitarianism explores the phenomenon of radical rebellion against the traditional understanding of the relationship between man and politics in Western civilization. One of its fundamental postulates is that politics, in regard to its ends, is

always limited by the fact that it can never cover all that humans need to reach fulfillment. It is not the duty of politics to make people happy because its field of action is delimited by human nature itself.

In its most primitive sense, totalitarian rebellion consists in demanding totality for politics, rejecting anything that implies any limit. The concrete ways of applying this unlimited way of understanding politics vary according to historical and cultural circumstances, but ultimately the various manifestations of totality come together in this excessive aspiration to redeem man through politics. The totalitarian reality comprises a set of closely intertwined characteristics, so any of them allow to understand the phenomenon as a whole. Hence, philosophers of politics have described the totalitarian phenomenon using some of its essential elements to reveal how all the symptoms of this “virus” come together as a kind of “syndrome”, originating and reinforcing each other. For instance, Eric Voegelin² analyzes totalitarianism from gnosticism; Hannah Arendt³, from the essence of totalitarian terror; Manuel García Pelayo⁴, as a form of eschatological myth; Karl Jaspers⁵, from the ability of totalitarian regimes to transmute lies into truth; and Albert Camus⁶, as an existential rebellion against the order of creation.

2 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 108-89. See also, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1968), 13-49.

3 Aside from her famous *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, see also “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government”, in *The Review of Politics* 15, nº 3 (July, 1953): 303-27.

4 Manuel García Pelayo. “El reino feliz de los tiempos finales”, *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 2 (1958): 157-87.

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

6 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Nueva York: Vintage Books, 1991).

In *The revolution of nihilism*⁷, the German politician Hermann Rauschning provides a particularly valuable analysis for the subject at hand, as the author helps to understand why continuous and deliberate destruction is also an essential axis of the totalitarian phenomenon. The totalitarian message, Rauschning explains, is always presented as an ideology of hope for the construction of a new order, when in reality it is nothing other than a movement towards nihilistic destruction. The true essence of totalitarianism is not in its philosophy or doctrine, but in its dynamics as a “process” of destruction. There is no clear ideology but only a firm determination to destroy any pre-existing order. The vigor of the totalitarian ideal is maintained, despite lacking concrete content, since the process of destruction is maintained at all costs: “We may not yet have reached goodness, but the process is moving forward as we are destroying evil”. Totalitarian regimes always need some conflict, some threat that must be destroyed to maintain the dynamic of the process: this is what really gives “life” to the revolutionary process. Totalitarian leaders, therefore, know that they must keep enthusiastic, delivering incendiary phrases, and that they can never stop warning against the serious threats to the process, the storms that are coming, assassination conspiracies, the enemies that regroup, and reviving the fighting spirit so as to never give advantage to the adversaries. The more inconsistent and irrational the message, the better, because the object of the speech is to maintain the combative instinct of the masses in order to justify a new phase of destruction. Therefore, it is totally useless to participate in discussions about the concrete content of a totalitarian doctrine. The hope that this process will ever end is also an illusion. As a permanent revolution, it is a “pure and simple action, a dynamic in the emptiness, a

7 Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism* (Nueva York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1939).

revolution in variable time". Its 'philosophy' is to seize any opportunity to increase the movement's own power, in order to have more elements under its control⁸. Totalitarian processes, then, are movements that maintain their vitality as long as they are capable of generating enthusiasm for destruction. They are the negation and the absence of any positive affirmation, which means it has a continuous will to undo, which determines the nihilistic dimension of the totalitarian spirit. And, paradoxically, this lack of principle is one of the main secrets of its effectiveness: a permanent revolution, impossible to bring to an end⁹.

Rauschning warns that the destructive vocation of a totalitarian regime does not end in the material demolition of a country. Not only hospital and educational centers, infrastructure, companies of all sizes, the countryside and agricultural production, electrical and telecommunications systems, transport networks, dams and aqueducts are being completely devastated, but institutions as well: courts of justice, the electoral system, the armed forces, the police, the media, universities and cultural centers are gradually distorted and corrupted. In short, everything that is indispensable for the normal development of a society. However, Rauschning explains that the destruction is still much more severe. As devastating as all the destruction of a country's material and institutional order is, it is still inferior to the immense spiritual

8 Rauschning, 23.

9 *Ibíd.*, 51. As explained by Juan Carlos Rey: For Chávez, his revolution, unlike other classic revolutions in Latin America, is a continuous and progressive process that unfolds indefinitely over time. Using Trotsky's expression, Chavez has said that it is a "permanent Revolution", in which the original constituent power (i.e., the revolutionary power) is permanently active. "Mito y Política: el caso de Chávez en Venezuela", in J. C. Rey & G. T. Avelledo, *Actualidad de las formas irracionales de integración política*, Cuadernos del Centenario 3 (Caracas: Fundación Manuel García Pelayo, 2009), 19.

damage that a totalitarian regime is capable of inflicting on a nation's spirit. Even when it is not noticeable to the eye, like material devastation and institutional degradation are, it is illusory to suppose that the regime is less effective in its ability to demolish the vision of goodness and justice shared by the people: ultimately, what is to be destroyed is freedom, the most formidable obstacle to achieving total dominance, understood as people's ability to decide their own actions under the light of their conscience or, in other words, to be able to choose moral good according to right reason. There are various tactics that totalitarian regimes use to achieve this perverse goal. On the one hand, they extend their dominance over society in such a way that they practically force people to bow down as they need to survive or to continue their lives "normally". Food subsidies or the obligation to obtain a partisan identification document to be entitled to receive essential public services are examples of domination that are undermining the ability of people to act on conscience. Ultimately, these "subsidies" seek to break the will of the people, so that they yield, accept and adapt to what the regime requires, especially –and this is the critical point– if it involves acting against their own awareness. The regime destroys freedom in order to create a kind of blind automatism, since totalitarian rule requires conformity, rigidity and discipline¹⁰.

A second way to destroy freedom is even more terrible, with far more dire effects. Totalitarian regimes not only destroy freedom by bending people to their will, enticing them to act against their conscience. Its most perverse destructive task is that of the annihilation of morality itself, which is an essential aspect of freedom. The regime seeks to dull and cloud any

¹⁰ See Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless", in *Open Letters*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 134-35.

moral sense in the conscience of people in order to remove all potential obstacles to its project of total domination. At its finest, terror in the totalitarian experience does not primarily target the heinous acts these movements use to maintain and expand their domination, but their iron determination to use political power to transfigure human consciousness and thus spiritually degrade a society. This is why totalitarian regimes operate according to a value system radically different from the common categories that allow to distinguish between moral and immoral acts¹¹. For a totalitarian regime, there is no immoral or evil action in itself, however inhumane, as long as it serves the purpose of preserving power. In other words, human acts are valued according to whether or not they contribute to the continuity of the revolutionary process¹². This is the root of the cynical attitude that accompanies totalitarian leaders when they catalogue certain acts as virtuous despite they are clearly the opposite. They then exalt the lowest human passions to exploit rancor, resentment, envy, division and hatred among the people, because they consider that this contributes to maintaining and consolidating their power. They manage to mistake the good and the bad for each other in such a way that they celebrate the vilest acts as examples of virtue. Progressively, a general climate of apathy is created, in which the most grotesque actions of injustice and arbitrariness only provoke a very lukewarm reaction. Gradually, the nation

11 Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 303.

12 Graciela Soriano de García-Pelayo explains that the shameless irruption and installation in Venezuela of a perfectly “rational” revolutionary logic has been strange and different from the Christian and liberal vision of life held by hispanic societies (except for Cuba since the mid-20th century) so far. It is a means-to-ends logic that only conforms to the success of the revolution outside of any other “non-revolutionary” ethical or moral consideration. “La responsabilidad irresponsable”, *Claves de Razón Práctica* 196 (Madrid, October 2009), 5.

gets used to perceiving the common affairs of society based on the regime's amoral perspective: words become violent and hostile, mutual distrust grows, people degrade one another and express their rancor and hatred, obscenity prevails, the truth is manipulated, the humanity of others is denied, while everything that encourages valuing serene discussion, understanding, willingness to listen, the importance of the word, the testimony of life and peace is belittled. Reflecting on the situation of Eastern European countries after the collapse of Marxist systems, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI¹³ warned: The clearest and most awakened spirits of the liberated peoples speak of an immense moral abandonment, produced [by communism] after many years of spiritual degradation, and a dulling of the moral sense, whose loss and the dangers entails a damage that outweighs even economic consequences. The Patriarch of Moscow¹⁴ described the spiritual situation of the liberated countries after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in similar terms, stating that the perceptive powers of men living under a system of deception are inevitably clouded; thus, it is necessary to lead humanity back to eternal moral values, and to recover the –almost extinct– ability to listen to God's counsel.

Having fully understood the extent of totalitarian destruction, it is necessary to consider why the regime must come to its demise before undertaking reconstruction efforts. The germs of totalitarian passion can only be erased in the souls of individuals who regain the sense of true good in their own existence. Therefore, the totalitarian regime can only collapse when people recognize that they cannot lead their existence according to the distorted definition of good and evil proposed by the amoral code of the

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Verdad, valores, poder* (Madrid: Rialp, 1998), 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

revolution, and that they are responsible for their own lives in accordance with their conscientious truth. This means that, even if the regime were to end, the totalitarian spirit would remain among us if we fail to recover the meaning and value of goodness and justice, essential for the true exercise of human freedom. Any effort for material and institutional reconstruction could not last or be effective in a nation that does not agree on common moral convictions.

Konrad Adenauer's testimony

History offers precedents. At the end of the Second World War, Germany was totally devastated. The collapse was as total as the war: almost ten million Germans had died and the number of those who had to flee from the East was even larger, as were the wounded, widows and orphans; millions of men were prisoners of war; industrial production only reached a third of 1938's; the food ration was 1,000 calories a day; half of schoolchildren suffered from tuberculosis; unemployment, black market and demoralization were common¹⁵. The work necessary to rebuild such a country was immense. Where to start? Where to focus the very limited economic resources when everything was urgent, when everything was misery and desolation? How to find the necessary unity to undertake this or that path in the material reconstruction of the country without unleashing all kinds of disagreements, pressures, claims, confrontations, conflict and, eventually, violence? Whatever path was taken involved defining priorities and accepting sacrifices. The response of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the architect of the German reconstruction,

15 Horst Osterheld, "El político: documentación de una vida", in Terence Prittie, Horst Osterheld & François Seydoux, *Konrad Adenauer*. (Stuttgart: Bonn&Aktuell, 1983), 86.

was to convince the country that the first step was of a spiritual nature, and that the nation would be able to achieve nothing until a conscious answer to the following questions could be reached: How has the fall of the German people into the abyss been possible? What are the deepest reasons why we have fallen off such a precipice?¹⁶. According to Adenauer, the German people could only find the path towards a better future if they recognized the reasons why they had reached this fatal period in their history, so it was necessary to examine their conscience:

National socialism would not have reached power if it had not found in broad layers of the population the fertile ground to plant its poisoned seeds. I insist: broad layers of the population. It is incorrect to say that *caciques*, top military officials and big businessmen are the only culprits. It is quite possible that they are largely guilty, and their personal debt to the German people, who had to bring it before a court to be judged, will be as great as their power and influence once were. But that large part of the population that I have mentioned until now, the middle class, the peasants, the workers or the intellectuals, did not have the correct mindset, otherwise the victory of Nazism in 1933 and following years would not have been possible. The German nation is suffering from a mistaken conception of the State, of power and of the individual's own position. The State has been idolized and presented in an altar. The individual, their dignity and their worth have been sacrificed to this idol. National socialism is only a consequence, carried to the extreme of criminal-

16 Konrad Adenauer, *Memoirs 1945-53* (Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1966), 38-39.

ity, of the adoration of that materialistic vision of power and of the contempt of the value of the person¹⁷ (own translation).

According to Adenauer, the German people could not undertake the reconstruction without first acknowledging their deviation from the values of Christianity, having devoted themselves fully to the purely earthly, material things and to the deification of State power. It was there that they had to start in order to heal from within. The real challenge was to replace the materialistic with the Christian conception of life, for man had to be at the center and not the State. Under this Christian conception of life, individuals are not tools despised in the hands of officials, because as a work of God and responsible before God, they have a value that the group must respect¹⁸. During Germany's reconstruction, Adenauer concluded, the great task was to awaken the democratic forces of the nation so that democracy was much more than a parliamentary form of government but an ideology rooted in the recognition of dignity, the value, and the inalienable rights of every individual¹⁹.

Anamnesis

Recognizing the scope and effects of the nihilistic destruction of the spirit of Venezuelans at the hands of the Bolivarian Revolution is the true first step in reconstruction. It is a post-totalitarian reconstruction, as indicated in the title, not because it has to be undertaken after the fall of the regime, but because the reconstruction can only begin when there is a purpose to banish the totalitarian seed that the regime has planted in the soul of the

17 Konrad Adenauer, *El fin del nacionalismo* (Madrid: Encuentro, 2014), 29.

18 Osterheld, 87.

19 Adenauer, *Memoirs 1945-53*, 41.

nation. The true reconstruction, therefore, is not a consequence but a condition to bring this terrible chapter in our national history to an end. Adenauer wanted people to remember goodness and truth in order to regain that inner sense which allows to recognize the echo of truth in their conscience. Plato called *anamnesis* the process of searching from within, in the depth of consciousness, the meaning of our own existence in light of *logos*. For when facing injustice, it is not enough to denounce the evil which makes an individual a victim. The evil condemned must serve to illuminate the goodness lost. Fighting against the horrors of segregation and racial discrimination, Martin Luther King²⁰ warned that protesting could not be limited to describing injustices suffered. The worst aspect about discrimination is that it nurtures feelings of rancor in victims' hearts, making it harder for them to love, which we all yearn for. Therefore, what was decisive in Luther King's fight against racism was to recover what was lost: the vocation to love inscribed in the heart of every human being. In our case, it is not enough for the entire nation to identify and denounce all the appalling evil that the regime has caused. This is not enough, since reconstruction will only begin when the nation comes together in order to recover what was lost.

Venezuelan common speech demonstrates how people intuit that this call to *anamnesis* is, as a matter of fact, the way forward. Each generation finds the words to express the sense of its historical responsibility. Following the death of General Gómez, the challenge for that generation of Venezuelans was to initiate a new stage in the country's history, as is reflected in the words they used to describe this purpose: "found", "build", "raise", "sow",

20 This is a recurring matter in Martin Luther King's political discourse. See, e.g., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in Martin Luther King, *Autobiography* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 187-204.

etc. In our days, the words we hear are different. Venezuelans do not talk about building, but rather about rebuilding; not about finding themselves, but about re-finding ourselves; not about starting, but about renewing. In other words, we use words that evoke the need to remember a lost good. In some way, these words indicate that the challenge of this generation is not to start over but to resume a course based on foundations that remain to be rediscovered.

As a result of the false and perverse propaganda of the Bolivarian Revolution against the so-called '*puntofijismo*', many Venezuelans reject, almost *a priori* -and some even with vehemence-, any reference to the Venezuelan democratic experience that lasted for four decades until 1999. Is it not time to look forward towards new horizons for a country already so different from that of 1958? This is a much more recurrent question among young people, who have been told that what has been (mis)called the 'Fourth Republic' was a period of failure, characterized by corruption, elitist rule, support for economic oligarchies to the detriment of popular classes, and the repression of the dissident. Is it not necessary then to begin a new chapter in the history of Venezuela that not only leaves the Bolivarian Revolution behind but also that republican period that would have been the direct cause of the former's existence? What can that republican experience contribute to current day Venezuela and, especially, to its future? The words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI come to mind, when he warned that turning away from the great moral forces of history is the suicide of a nation²¹.

It is evident that today's country is very different from the Venezuela of 1958, the year which inaugurated the civil republic

²¹ Ratzinger, 39.

after dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown. It is also true that the experience of the country since 1999, the first year of the Bolivarian Revolution, has been in many ways unprecedented in its history. Despite its long militaristic and dictatorial past, Venezuela had never suffered the rigors of an autocracy of a totalitarian nature, inspired to such a high degree in the contempt for the freedom and dignity of humans: a revolution based on hatred, instrumentalized in violence and oriented towards the subordination of people to a dictatorship. There is also no precedent in our history for a dictatorial government that emerges, grows and strengthens itself using precisely the mechanisms of democracy that it destroys. A unique feature of the Bolivarian Revolution has undoubtedly been its particular ability to hide its project of total domination behind a facade of democratic institutions and procedures. The necessary reflection on the specific circumstances that Venezuela lives today and, particularly, on the essence of the Bolivarian Revolution as a project of totalitarian domination should not make us lose sight of the importance of analyzing current reality from a historical perspective. In doing so, we attest that the basic features of the Bolivarian Revolution are deeply rooted in Venezuela's historical development.

The Bolivarian Revolution disregards individual liberties, systematically violates fundamental human rights, exercises power arbitrarily and concentrates it autocratically at the expense of any institutional balance, relies on the Armed Forces as an organ of repression, validates its desecration in the courts of the law, and excessively squanders the country's resources without control and for its own benefit. It is not necessary to exhaust such a list to recognize the same arbitrary practices that characterized so many tyrannies of our past in the regime that has governed the

country since 1999. What distinguishes the Bolivarian Revolution as an unprecedented political phenomenon should not prevent us from verifying that, ultimately, it is one more dictatorship in the history of a country that has experienced tyranny after tyranny.

The voracious effort of the Bolivarian Revolution to destroy everything has also been a substantial part of Venezuela's experience with dictators. Rafael Caldera, founder of the civil republic together with Rómulo Betancourt, whose thoughts we must consider since a substantial axis of his political message was precisely *anamnesis*, used the myth of Sisyphus as a warning:

Many Venezuelan thinkers have pointed out that the Venezuelan drama could often be compared to the myth of Sisyphus, determined to ascend and lift a burden, but condemned to start again and again, after each new alternative, the same path of ascent. That transient interpretation of grief and national shame that great writers have identified when analyzing our history should remain present in the conscience of all of us, and I believe it is our duty to remind it to those who are governed and those who govern, to leaders and followers, to all the national community. The country must progress, and each stage of government would find no justification if it did not surpass the previous one. The drama lies in the effort to destroy what has been achieved, to deny what has been obtained, to ignore the result of the efforts of previous stages (own translation)²².

Similarly, Caldera recalled the words of Cecilio Acosta regarding this long history of "revolutions" that have done

²² "El Drama de Venezuela y el Mito de Sísifo", Folleto (Caracas: Fracción Parlamentaria de COPEI, 1984), 15.

nothing but destroy all previous achievements: they have made sacrifices, but no improvements; tears, but not yields; they have always been a deviation which has only led to the same point, with one more disillusion, with one less treasure²³.

The historical experience in Venezuela adds a critical element to this destructive nature, in order to recognize one of the most devastating aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution. As we have described, a fundamental component in the political message of this regime has been to arouse hostile, vengeful and spiteful emotions among the people. Through violent language that degrades the human condition with vile qualifications, the Bolivarian Revolution calls on the people to despise anyone who does not coincide with the revolutionary political project. Unfortunately, this sowing of hatred and rancor is not new in the history of Venezuela, either. On the contrary, it is perhaps the deepest root of the failures in the country's struggle for freedom. Regarding hatred as a decisive factor in our history, Caldera recurred to the testimony of Cecilio Acosta:

Political hatred, unleashing passions above all barriers and ignoring one another deviated us from the struggle within civilized institutions and led us to settle differences in cruel and destructive contests, ones that should have been overcome and resolved through the creative effort of our people, who on more than one occasion have testified to their immense capacity to assimilate and promote everything that serves to exalt the human spirit (own translation)²⁴.

²³ *De Carabobo a Puntofijo* (Caracas: Libros Marcados, 2008), 158.

²⁴ "El prestigio del Parlamento", President Rafael Caldera discourse on the installation of the 106th meeting of the Caracas Council, April 14, 1971, in Rafael Caldera, *Parlamento Mundial - Una voz latinoamericana* (Caracas: Ediciones del Congreso de la República, 1984), 24-25.

But autocratic arbitrariness, destruction and political hatred are not the only constants in our history. There have also been two traditions is constant struggle. Besides the *caudillista* tradition, there has also been a civil tradition that has always been reborn in the fight against tyrannies, a civil tradition that has recorded the longings for the dignified and legitimate organization of the Venezuelan people²⁵. Caldera responded to those who have argued that the people of Venezuela can only be governed by the tyrant's dominant whip stating that, deep within the national will, denatured by the abuses and outrages of the 'necessary gendarmes', beats a yearning for freedom, for human dignity, ready to sprout every time a faint crack was opened in the darkness of oppression²⁶. In the face of tyrannies, Venezuela has always had a civil tradition committed to sowing a fundamental sentiment to conquer the future in the collective spirit: the denial of hatred, the purpose of understanding, the essential conciliation to build the foundations of a better Venezuela²⁷. The country's historical experience, Caldera explained, shines a light of hope by teaching us that dictatorships have never been able to sustain themselves peacefully, achieving the adherence of the peoples; and that even those that have had peoples in permanent tension through constant stimuli and through the use of all tricks imagined by propaganda have not been able to achieve firm majority adherence, much less have they managed to maintain hold of power without the

25 Rafael Caldera's intervention in the first discussion of the draft of the National Constitution, in the session of the Constituent Assembly on February 11, 1947 in *Gobierno y época de la Junta Revolucionaria*, Colección Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX, 54 (Caracas: Congreso de la República, 1989), 177-78.

26 Caldera, *De Carabobo a Puntofijo*, 113

27 Idem.

support of an expensive and radicalized military organization²⁸. Caldera insisted that however long dictatorships may have been, however absolute and strong in their exercise of command, when the will of the people is consulted, it is clearly inclined in favor of freedom and democracy²⁹. Acknowledging this lesson of hope, also present in our history, is as essential as noting the enormous obstacles on Venezuela's path to freedom.

This historical perspective should help us to better understand current reality. First, we recognize that arbitrariness, the desire for destruction and the use of hatred to divide the country, basic features of the regime, are embedded in a long tradition of dictatorships and autocratic governments. It is painful but necessary to accept that the Bolivarian Revolution is not an accident in the country's history, but a process with deep roots in our history of becoming a nation. This same historical perspective must also help acknowledge that what is truly unique from it is the democratic experience that began in Venezuela in 1958 and that lasted four decades. Political freedom, which for more than a century and a half after our independence was only a hope, never capable of prevailing in the face of dictatorships, finally managed to establish and consolidate itself for a considerable period of time. After achieving our independence as a sovereign nation, the civil republic was the first victory of freedom in our history. For the first time, freedom went from being a desire in the hearts of the people to becoming a real experience. In Caldera's words, after a century and a half lost in marches and countermarches, playing with violence to settle differences, and in the personal

28 "La libertad política, condición esencial del desarrollo", in *Ideario-La democracia cristiana en América Latina* (Barcelona: Ediciones Ariel, 1970), 119-20.

29 "Perspectivas de la democracia en América Latina" en *Parlamento Mundial - Una voz latinoamericana*, 104

and despotic ambition of the most daring in order to seize the destiny of the nation, it was proven that the people of Venezuela are fit to live in freedom, to govern themselves and to reconquer their destiny with their own free will³⁰.

Contrasting the last two periods in our political development –from 1958 to 1999, and from 1999 until today– illustrates how the Bolivarian Revolution is both “old” insofar as it repeats vices from the past, and “new” as it formed an unprecedented civil republic in our history. This fact is of enormous transcendence for our fight for freedom. The generation that managed to establish a civil republic, just like the current generation will also manage to do so, achieved democracy “by way of pain”³¹. A path of pain that, as it happens today, also faced arbitrariness, pride, repression, destruction and hatred. It is foolish, therefore, to ignore their testimony and disregard the bases on which they managed to prevail in the struggle. Caldera considered it necessary for new generations concerned about the destiny of their homeland to acknowledge the process that served as the basis and foundation of democratic institutions by the will of our people³², so that they can better value the effort of national understanding, of harmony between former contenders, of sum of wills, which was the initial sign of Venezuelan democracy³³. The path taken by the only generation in Venezuela that managed to defeat the *caudillista* tradition and that established a stable democratic system which responded to the people’s desire to seek their future in freedom is

30 Caldera, *De Carabobo a Puntofijo*, 129

31 “Del mismo sufrimiento y la misma esperanza” in *El bloque latinoamericano* (Mérida: Universidad de los Andes, 1966), 86. Caldera’s original expression was: “*Hemos venido de nuevo al ejercicio democrático y hemos llegado a él por el camino del dolor*”.

32 “Una aventura llamada COPEI”, pamphlet (Caracas: Publicaciones del Partido Socialcristiano COPEI, 1981), 14

33 *Ibid.*, 13

the most valuable lesson that our history offers to those who must prevail today against a new tyranny.

Beyond totalitarian destruction

Resuming the course of anamnesis implies re-encountering the principles and values around which the nation was united during the civil republic. The national unity that encouraged the so-called “January 23 spirit” required the commitment of all political forces to see beyond their respective positions to converge on the set of principles –truths– that had to be the common and uncontroversial foundation of Venezuelan democracy. According to Caldera, the “January 23 spirit” was, in dire but exciting moments, a movement of unity within plurality, of convergence amid divergences, of common purpose to face the danger of moving back in time, or to the past shipwreck of noble intentions amid the lurks of barbarism³⁴. Each individual was to promote their values and vision of the country, but no political force would be unaware, for instance, of the fact that a political project can never be above the human being for politics is called to serve man, or that human dignity is the starting point of politics, that freedom is indispensable for the authentic development of the human person, and that social justice is a fundamental requirement for the common good.

As explained in the explanatory statement of the draft for the constitution that the Bicameral Commission presented to the Legislative Chambers in 1961, the purpose was to write a fundamental text that did not represent partial points of view, but rather the basic principles of national political life in which

³⁴ “El espíritu del 23 de enero”, pamphlet (Caracas: Imprenta del Congreso de la República, 1989), 17.

there could be convergence of thoughts and opinions in the vast majority. Caldera affirmed that the most important concept in the Constitution was that of the consensus necessary for pluralist democracy to take hold and strengthen itself, amid the incessant controversy that its very dialectical structure fosters among different political forces. He insisted that consensus must be guarded, and restored if lost; it had to be enriched through dialogue, which implies a willingness to listen, an inclination to value and accept everything that contributes to the benefit of all and to the satisfaction of the highest national interests, no matter the sector it came from³⁵. The founders of the civil republic understood then that the Constitution should belong to all Venezuelans because, as explained by Juan Carlos Rey, the fact that a certain numerical majority formally approves a Constitution will not guarantee the existence of a true constitutional political order if its content is not known and accepted by an important part of the citizenry, which should exceed, by far, the simple majority. He also brings to memory the fact that all the great natural law theorists, from Hobbes to Rousseau, considered that for the legitimacy of a fundamental decision, such as the approval of the original social contract, the favorable vote of the majority of the citizens was not enough, for unanimity was required³⁶.

Thus, the doctrinal principles of the 1961 Constitution, set out in its preamble, constituted the backbone of a legal system called to keep the ground within which the different criteria were confronted and positive contributions were added. Only with the solemn adherence of all democratic forces to the principles that underlie a plural democracy, added Caldera, could one fight

35 "A 15 años de la Constitución Venezolana", pamphlet (Caracas; Ediciones del Congreso de la República, 1976), 25.

36 See "Constitución y Poder Constituyente en el proyecto político de Hugo Chávez", *SIC LXX*, N° 697 (agosto 2007): 307-316

against the most ominous of the past, against the remnants of assault and adventurism³⁷.

When considering the spiritual scope of totalitarian destruction, we previously stated that reconstituting the nation's *ethos* could be an even more arduous task than the immense work of material reconstruction: rediscovering the truths that support democracy means not only banishing the totalitarian distortion of morals in the soul of the nation, but also confronting a cultural reality that goes far beyond our borders, a result of the relativistic conception of democracy that has managed to become the *Weltanschauung* of our times. The modern concept of democracy seems to be inextricably linked with relativism, which is presented as the true guarantee of freedom³⁸. In this context, any appeal to the truth is accused of being against democracy, since it would no longer be a public good, but an exclusively private good. The radical relativist position separates the concepts of good and truth from politics, considering them detrimental to freedom. Democracy is then conceived in a purely formal way: as a framework of rules that makes the formation of majorities and the transmission and alternation of power possible³⁹.

Yet Pope John Paul II insisted that "a true democracy" is not only the result of a formal respect for the rules, but rather the fruit of the convinced acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures: the dignity of every person, the respect for human rights, the assumption of the common good as an end and regulatory criterion of political life. When the general consensus on these values is broken, the stability of democracy is seriously

37 "Discurso de Rafael Caldera en el acto solemne de la firma de la Constitución el 23 de enero de 1961" (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1961), 10-11.

38 Ratzinger, 84.

39 Ibid., 84-85.

compromised because, as there are no truths about the humane that guide political action, human ideas and convictions can be easily exploited for purposes of power, whereby democracy can become a visible or hidden totalitarianism, as history shows⁴⁰. According to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, the truth is not a product of politics (the verdict of the majority, for example); rather, truth proceeds and illuminates it. He states that praxis does not create the truth, but rather that the truth is what makes correct praxis possible; and that politics is fair and promotes freedom when it serves a system of truths and rights that reason shows to man⁴¹.

In the midst of this effort to achieve anamnesis in order to re-find ourselves as a nation, we cannot avoid the questions that Benedict XVI asks democracies, as well as the answer he offers: Is it not necessary that there is a non-relativistic nucleus also in democracy? Has democracy not been ultimately built to guarantee human rights, which are inviolable? Are not the guarantee and the assurance of human rights the deepest reason for the need for democracy? Human rights are not subjected to the commandment of pluralism and tolerance; they are the content of tolerance and freedom. **That means that truth –namely, ethical truth– seems to be inalienable for democracy⁴².**

The totalitarianism of the Bolivarian Revolution has led the country to the darkest of its past, to a misery and desolation perhaps even worse than what the country suffered during the years of the Federal War in the 19th century. However, if Venezuela is able to overcome relativistic pressure and re-find the moral foundation of democracy as a way of life in the effort to rebuild itself, the nation could place itself at the vanguard of Latin America once

40 Juan Pablo II, *Centesimus annus*, n. 46

41 Ratzinger, 86.

42 *Ibid.*, 84-85 (highlights of our own).

The post-totalitarian reconstruction

again. As it already did in the fight for independence, Venezuela could clear the way to freedom by showing fellow countries, whose democracies succumb to relativism, the future course they will have to take in order to avoid falling prey to the totalitarian threat that hangs increasingly ominous above the hemisphere.