

Fear, pain, and bad governments

They know my name.

Democratization

“May they not come for me, may they not come for me, may they not come for me” —that has been my litany for over a year in the Venezuela of 2024–2025. We have marked a year of living under an occupying force that becomes more intrusive or oppressive each day, perfects its forms of cruelty daily, and spreads more fear with each passing day. There are so many forms of fear experienced in this country that this, precisely, is the only certainty of living in Venezuela.

In that certainty I've found a kind of “liberation” —or rather, resignation: They know where I am, they know whom I speak with, and no matter how many VPNs I activate, they haven't come for me because, perhaps, I'm simply not useful enough to their system of terror and the quotas demanded of them.

They'll come for everyone, and they have already begun to come for their own. Our country has become like that poem by Martin Niemöller: “When the Nazis came for the communists, I kept quiet; I wasn't a communist...” because in a state of terror, the state itself is not exempt from living amid terror —nor from strengthening itself through it. Today, the Venezuelan society is one of fear and distrust, where people speak in whispers in order to survive, isolated and atomized.

Amidst the rumors and our limited lives, cynical voices have proliferated, because they have found a way to survive learned hopelessness, while only suffering another form of mourning. In the face of all this, trying to resist has become a daily practice, so as not to perish before a system that seeks to flatten every dimension of our lives.

Along these lines, it says much about the Venezuelan spirit that we have refined and discovered forms of resistance, of nonviolent struggle, of peaceful and civic movements to confront a dictatorial system that has modernized its repressive, torturous, and persecutory character toward any living being it perceives as dissident –and even so, not a single armed movement has emerged against the dictatorship. This speaks to the value Venezuelans place on what is necessary to recover and sustain a democracy grounded in freedom.

“Living” in a society based on fear means distrusting everything that isn’t yourself. When we remain in this context for so long, we begin to doubt even our own individual capacities, because fear is a kind of dynamite that brings confidence crashing down and breaks our society with its ability to stick to you like glue and sink into your bones like an undeserved cold.

It must be said, then, that the Chavista regime –just like the Nicaraguan and Cuban regimes— because they are founded on fear, are therefore bad governments. By this I don’t mean that they are ineffective or inefficient; I mean the bad, the evil, that is “that kind of negative element that we cannot even understand, much less express clearly, and even less explain to our full satisfaction.

Evil is that which challenges and shatters the intelligibility that makes the world habitable...”¹

It would be an overstatement to claim that there is something purely evil, because not everything that stands in opposition to what we take as such is purely good either. But that does not negate the fact that evil operates, exists, develops, and uses power structures (such as the State and the rest of the formal public institutions) to bring about a world that becomes increasingly difficult to explain and to inhabit.

This evil is distributed along a normal curve, and for that reason authoritarian governments –those that violate human rights— should be judged in a de-ideologized manner. Because fear and evil are capable of leaving their mark on everyone’s life, regardless of the cause for which we vote –if we are permitted to vote at all.

For fear to become powerful, there must be some instrument of coercion –and that is pain. Under authoritarian governments, societies are subjected to a range of pains, both physical and emotional, which are useful for atomizing, corrupting, and co-opting in every possible way until they succeed in breaking and harming; this is it has has coercive power.

Although we now live in a world where self-help and therapy are instantly accessible, it is important to reflect on the evaluative weight we assign to pain in order to protect ourselves from the suffering it generates. This requires demystifying it, insofar as suffering is not inexorably destined to lead us to a greater good;

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Miedo líquido*. Ediciones Paidós, 1st ed., Barcelona, España, 2021. Own translation.

it does not compete, because no suffering is less valid than that experienced by another person; nor does it stratify, since the pain generated in public life does not make us better or worse individuals relative to others.

Pain, especially when collective, does not come with a practical guide for its complete healing in a standardized way. Collective pain and trauma simply exist, and perhaps most of the time they do not carry a profound lesson.

The collectivization of the above and the social degradation generated by fear therefore demand rigorous study, because such a study is increasingly important: it is capable of addressing how these forces undermine and shape the functioning of the public sphere, and of fostering leadership and societies that are deeply wounded —societies that require diverse and costly processes of political and social repair.

This is urgent because the instrumentalization of pain under a strategy of fear is far too complex to be addressed merely through the “will to effort.” This refers to how societies supposedly become resilient simply by deciding to do so —a common trope of our times that generates individual frustration, while obscuring and romanticizing the origins of what causes our suffering.

Fear and pain have no meaning, but resisting them does. To pursue a free life, with reasons to value, we face the complex —but possible— task of understanding our wounds in order to generate public value and develop the capacity to bad governments. Neither Venezuela nor any other society is biologically or socially condemned to pain and fear; it is precisely for this reason that it falls upon us to reclaim a country we can understand.