

Pulling Back the Veil of the Vile

Social Revolt & the End of Dictatorship

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*In Memoriam Luis Ortiz Puppó**

Populism is the manifestation of political demagoguery that combines financial power and indoctrinated populations. Propaganda is used to indoctrinate the mob.

This social base can amount to a significant percentage of the population—as in Mussolini’s Italy or Nazi Germany—or a small but highly-visible group effusively cheering on their defiant and confrontational leader. Such a leader carries out a plan to revise history and accommodate reality to his own ideology.

Authoritarian figures become more powerful as they gain more attention. So, speaking nonsense and falsifying facts, and targeting a broad spectrum of the populace, while denying the truth and covering up crimes also becomes commonplace, bringing tyrants ever-increasing visibility.

In the era of Twitter, electronic tools are used the same way Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, used radio, press, cinema, and theater to manufacture official disinformation. The purpose is always the same: to dictate. Between 1973 and 1990, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet used his executive orders to dictate his plan for law and order, commanding the country according to his own will while hiding his crimes. He fed the anger of his supporters and encouraged them to act in the same violent way he did.

Authoritarianism reproduces vertically through all segments of society. And the only way to stop it is to resist.

In order to rally and direct the population, the Nazi machinery spread shameless lies, fictionalizing reality, and interpreted events according to its own ideological perspective and interests. If reality didn’t fit in with the Nazi agenda, the propaganda experts altered it so the facts could accord with the Führer’s perspective. Principle 7 of Goebbels’ *19 Propaganda Principles* states: “Credibility alone must determine whether propaganda output should be true or false.”

False information to manipulate the population was a *modus operandi* of the Nazi regime in Germany, but also of Franco’s Nationalist dictatorship in Spain, Fascism in Italy and Stalinism in the former Soviet Union, among others.

Through systematic deception, ideology emerges and spreads. This helps explain why the racist matrix of German National Socialism captured the minds of many, indoctrinating the population with the supposed superiority of the “Aryan race” and on the supposed inferiority of other “races,” such as Jews, Poles, and Roma.

The building process of German racism—as well as that of other colonialist European powers—was based on Christian hostility toward non-Christian cultures.

The long history of racism in Germany facilitated the Nazi escalation that started with the boycott against the so-called “foreign races” to the discriminatory Nuremberg Laws of 1935 until the final solution and systematic mass murder perpetrated in order to install an “ethnic new order.”

The idea of race is a matter of hierarchy, not genealogy or physiognomy. Through hierarchies holders of power de-humanize other human beings. That is the danger of hierarchical societies and institutions.

The Nazis believed themselves to be superior, but they viewed the outside world as a place where they needed to challenge and compete in order to survive. This is typical of the state of permanent war that works as a fuel for confrontational agendas. Indeed, like supposedly democratic regimes, all dictatorships need enemies to justify their bigotry. It is their strength but also their perdition, because sooner or later a stronger force emerges and resists them until their final decline.

South American dictatorships adopted Nazi-like propaganda methods based on lies promoted through radio, TV and newspapers, methods complemented by torture and disappearances. They ignited flames of nationalism and patriotism to justify their politics of persecution and denunciation, splashing their flags with drops of racism and *machismo* while indoctrinating the population to abusively label designated enemies. Chile's Pinochet called his opponents and enemies "humanoids," completely stripping them of humanity.

The dictators systematically violated human rights and committed crimes against humanity with no remorse. The South African apartheid regime utilized a mechanism of labeling and displacing a huge number of people, consigning them to segregated areas.

In Latin, *volvere*, "to revolt," means a continuous unfolding of events carried out by people who are active agents of their destiny. Revolts reveal historical truth. They also place in people's imagination a collective desire. "We Have the Right to Leisure" was one slogan of the Paris Commune in 1871; "To Hell with Afrikaans" was the triggering motto during the long period of resistance in South Africa after the Soweto uprising of 1976; "He's Going to Fall" was the main chant referring to the Chilean tyrant Pinochet during the nationwide protests between 1983 and 1987. All of these slogans expressed collective desires that signaled popular momentum. And such desires are intrinsically connected to the spirit of the revolt.

Through the installation of collective desires, revolt creates a mindset that detaches people from the old social regime and stimulates their imagination to self-organize in new, transversal fashions. New social subjects spring up in the light of the revolt. But it is also a social mirror where people see each other and reshape human interactions by gathering and being together.

Nineteenth-century French novelist Victor Hugo reflected on the relationship between revolt, insurrection, riot, and truth. In his view, the people, *les misérables*, hold the space that can make political truth visible. Also made visible are the lies of the powerful. The Soweto uprising and related protests were the events that, by their size and unanimity of purpose, rendered apartheid transparent, so it could be seen clearly for what it was—a hideous racist regimen.

Finding political truth, though, is not enough because revolt is only, to cite Hugo's apt metaphor, a passing storm in the social atmosphere.

Although riots and insurrections are both aspects of it, revolt is not necessarily about taking political power. In other words, revolt is a moment of social agitation that can dismantle power but can also create counter-power, enabling social groups and movements to make their own model of social life.

For these models to be successful, they need to be community-oriented at a local level. Otherwise, the revolt becomes a grand-scale revolution that institutionalizes itself, petrifying the vibrant body of society, stagnating life and repressing people. The Terror in the wake of the French Revolution, the institutionalization of the Mexican Revolution through the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the Gulags during the Stalinist period, and the long-lived dictatorial Chinese regime illustrate the cruel extremes of successful revolutions.

Revolution is authoritarian because it imposes itself through power, while revolt is an ongoing and permanent agency of the populace that returns to communities a sense of autonomy and self-determination. Revolutions tend to steal power and truth from the people and put them in the hands of political people—the *caudillos* as they are known in Spanish. This is why revolutions are susceptible to becoming tyrannies. Revolt is, in contrast, a spontaneous manifestation of people who actively rise up to recover the truth and dismantle demagoguery.

Revolt is also a return to egalitarian social dynamics, in which hierarchies no longer seem permanently unchallengeable. After the Soweto uprising, people became more confident in resisting the institutionalized racist system. Likewise, the protests in Chile during the 1980s unveiled the dictatorship's real face and triggered the social re-articulation of society, expressed in the form of active communities. In both cases external institutionalized hierarchies, as well as internal social hierarchies, became more visible and, therefore, more easily resisted.

* *Luis Ortiz Puppo (1932–2016) was a history teacher, a radical socialist, gay, and bohemian freethinker. He helped an entire generation of individuals, who spent time at a house in Marconi Street in Santiago, Chile during and after the military dictatorship (1970s to 1990s), to believe in the power of words.*

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