

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THOSE GOVERNED BY A TYRANT

“My innocence is my obedience.”

Eric Eichman at the judgements of  
Nuremberg in Hanna Arendt,  
*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*

“He who does not obey, will not eat.”

Leon Trotsky, *The death of Ivan Ilich  
and other stories.*

**A**lthough the concern for the psychology of the tyrant has occupied the political and literary thought of historians, philosophers and writers of all times (see Latin American literature works like *El tirano banderas*, *El Facundo*, *El señor presidente*, *Yo, el supremo*, *El recurso del método*, *El otoño del patriarca*, among many others), and some of its features emerge in the study of myths and religions, few pages have been written about the psychology of those governed by a tyrant.

In fact, the systematic study of the individual, of the human person has not been carried out until very recently. Its beginnings are almost simultaneous with modern psychology. Considering, as Carl G. Jung suggests, that it is always easier to study the object than the subject, especially when the one studying is the subject.

If we were to trace a line from where the observation of reality begins from a rational point of view, we would have to begin in the world of phenomenology, in the objective phenomenon, at the beginning of the Aristotelian science. Introspection although practiced by sages and visionaries from very early times, seems to have evaded Western thought for several centuries. The urgency of understanding the external seems to have obscured the urgency of understanding the internal. In fact, in the discourse that deals with human knowledge, and specifically for recent philosophers such as Hume, for example, the mind or the human conscience was solely a receptacle for events and sensations.

While this is true, it also is true that there have been moments in the development of human conscience that have set the standard to identify the mechanisms which the human beings use in attempting to understand the objective world that has brought us infallibly to postulate our own rational and intuitive conscience, a thinking being, and rational ego.

According to psychologist and essayist Nathaniel Branden by ‘ego’ we understand “the unifying center of

conscience; the fundamental sense of the ‘I’; that which perceives reality, preserves the internal continuity of our own existence and generates a sense of identity.” (Nathaniel Branden. *Honoring the Self*. Bentam Books, 1985, p.74) According to Branden, it is the efficacy of the relationship we have with our conscience that guarantees our survival.

In philosophy, Socrates is the one who raises the standard of reason as an instrument to understanding reality. And it is Socrates who suggests that wisdom consists of knowing our epistemological limitations in apprehending or capturing reality. Omniscience is an attribute of the divinity; reason is a human attribute. Because, how do we arrive at knowledge and at truth if not through the processes of logic, of deduction, or of induction, through critical thought, that are all attributes of reason? For Martí there was no “better rite of religion than the free use of reason,” and he added: “[We] love freedom because in it we see the truth [...]”

According to Branden, mental health depends on a healthy ego. This is an affirmation of the human conscience. The election of whether to think or not to think, of being conscious, of projecting the light of conscience outwardly toward the world, and inwardly to our own selves, toward ourselves, is our primary obligation as human beings. Remember the words of Socrates: “know thyself.”

He who does not insist on the effort that the rational thought presupposes fails the self, fails himself at the most basic level. Martí insisted that “the art of thinking is to see ideas globally and entirely, from the root to the fruit,” and he considered that “beautiful is the man obstinate in rational virtue, pious of the heart, contained by judgment.” For Martí, as for us, to honor reason is to honor the human being.

According to Branden, “The use of reason is consequently the disposition of the self to think independently, the live being guided by our own mind, and have the courage to arrive at our own perceptions and judgments. Human conscience is honored by wanting to know not only what we think, but what we feel, what we want, what we need, why we suffer, what frightens us, what angers us, and by accepting our right to experience such feelings. The opposite of this attitude is the negation of the self, repression, self-hatred.”

Following Martí’s thought and briefly getting into the area of modern psychotherapy, mental health consists of enabling the person to live authentically, to speak and act from his or her most intimate convictions and feelings, to refuse to accept undeserved blames and do all that is possible to correct that for which blame is deserved. For Martí, freedom is “the right that every man has to be honest and to think and to speak without hypocrisy.”

Thinking and judging mean to select one’s own values, to individualize as Jung suggests, “the absolutely necessary integration of the self, possible only when the elements of

the unconscious, even though they may be evil, appear to the conscience and we come to know ourselves) (Carl Gustav Jung. "The [undiscovered self]," *Civilization in Transition*, 2nd Ed. Bollingen XX Series, Princeton University Press, 1970, [pp]. 284-292). To individualize, therefore, is to create a defined personality; an identity.

For some people, according to Branden, this is a terrifying responsibility. There are people who, deep inside do not want to have a personal identity, no matter how much they chastise the psychiatrist when expressing their tormented existence and emptiness. This psychology, suggests Branden, naturally represents the most complete rebelliousness against our own nature as human beings, more specifically it rises against our willful conscience and translates into avoiding the responsibility of being human.

There are also people who live in totalitarian and highly oppressive societies like that of Cuba where it is forbidden to think for oneself, and where it is expected that the individual surrenders to the ideology and to the state. The state has and still does utilize highly coercive and sophisticated tactics against the individual to not only prevent his thoughts and convictions to blossom, but rather to create a new identity for him or her through an intense and in many cases inhuman process of psycho-ideological re-education that has been called "the creation of the new man." This process of re-education as in the case of China, or of the former Soviet Union are carried

out by applying the Chinese techniques of what is commonly called "brainwashing." (See Robert Jay Lifton. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: a Study of "Brainwashing" in China*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963). According to Lifton: "The official Chinese-communist program called *szu-hsiang kai-tsao*, (translated differently as "ideological re-molding," "ideological reformation," or what we will call here, "thought reform") in fact has emerged as one of the most powerful human efforts at manipulation ever carried out." And Lifton adds: "Surely such a program is not new in any way: imposed dogmas, inquisitions, and the movements of mas-

sive conversion have existed in almost every country and in every century in history. But the Chinese communists have added a more organized character to their program, complete and deliberate -a more total character, as well as a unique mixture of energetic and ingenious psychological techniques."

## Tyranny

**Like a disease, tyranny is recognized by its symptoms. A plague that could render your freedoms fatal. These symptoms are the features of political leadership that the ancient Greeks most feared, and as an antidote they conceived democracy. They are as follows:**

- **Afraid to lose his position, a tyrant rules by fear, and in fear of everyone.**
- **His decisions are affected by this fear.**
- **A tyrant rises above the law although he invokes it.**
- **A tyrant does not accept criticism not even from his friends.**
- **A tyrant cannot be held accountable.**
- **A tyrant does not listen to advice.**
- **A tyrant tries to prevent those who disagree with him to participate in politics.**

Paul Woodruff. *First Democracy. The challenge of an ancient idea*. Oxford University Press, 2005 pp. 67-70.

The end is to achieve the integration of the population to the new political and economic models, and to achieve it, not only is the political and economic subjugation necessary, but rather the psychological adaptation of the population to the new ethical and epistemological models. This is irremissibly translated into the annihilation of the symbols, ideas, initiatives and individual actions, vestiges of another time, as well as the weakening of the ethical values and morals associated with the previous society.

The techniques used in China to achieve the so-called "thought reformation" according to Lifton, include, but are not limited to, the control of the environment, mystic manipulation, the demand for purity, the cult of confession, the sacred "science," linguistic overload (the use of clichés or slogans), doctrine over the individual and the attitude that existence does not matter. All of these techniques have been used through varying degrees of intensity and cruelty on the entire Cuban population, from political prisoners to dissidents, members of the opposition, teachers, and even children.

The uncertainty and internal dissonance that are produced in the individual as a result of re-education, ideological repression, and terror, have turned him or her into a person in a constant state of paranoia and fear that his or her thoughts or actions would anger the authorities. Fear of intellectual independence can occur in several degrees of intensity. But, what are the consequences when this fear becomes the prevailing characteristic in the psychology of a person (or of a society)?

For Branden all living species that possess a conscience survive only by the guidance of its own knowledge, that is the role that conscience plays in a living organism. If a human being refuses (or is impeded) from using his/her specific form of knowledge, if he/she decides that thinking requires too much effort (or if it is too dangerous) or if the

selection of the values that are going to guide him/her in his/her actions is a terrifying responsibility (or a mortal risk), then if he/she wants to survive and function in the world he/she can only do it through the minds of others, by means of the conclusions, values and judgments of others (of the leader, of the party or of the leadership).

The “mental laziness” to which Miguel de Unamuno refers in his essay *My Religion* or the selection that the dreamer makes in the *Circular Ruins* of Jorge Luis Borges, that only the one who thinks deserves to exist refers to this type of person. The degradation and annihilation of the man who thinks in a totalitarian society are captured in the novel, *Heroes Graze in my Garden* by the Cuban writer Heberto Padilla, where “men are a report” and where the protagonist feels the ubiquitous presence of the dictator in each decision he makes.

This type of person (or character), according to Branden, knows consciously or unconsciously that he/she does not know what to do, but that he/she needs to know in order to make decisions about the infinite number of alternatives that every day life presents. Lacking the ability to think and act for him/herself, he/she concludes that the others (the leader, the leaders, the party) do seem to know how to live and work, so the only way to guarantee his/her own existence is to follow the directions and guidance of the leader, and of the party, and live off other people’s knowledge.

Once the internal *versus* external tension has dissolved, those governed by a tyrant abdicate and give in to others, to the leader, to the leaders, to the party, to those, who know all the answers, because not only do they save him the effort, but rather save him from the risk of thinking for himself. They, and not him or her, they do indeed know, and they somehow possess the control over that now unknowable mystery that is their present reality.

According to Branden these individuals do not really choose to be converted into intellectual dependants; they begin by failing in not wanting (or in not being able to) assume the responsibility of thinking and judging by themselves and then are forced into a position of total dependence, the prelude to slavery.

Branden adds: [...] “The man of self-esteem and of sovereign conscience struggles with reality, with nature, with the objective universe of facts, his mind is their only guarantee of survival and therefore will develop the ability to think. But the psycho-epistemologically dependent personality”, as Branden suggests, “does not live in a universe of facts, but in a universe of people. People, not facts, are his

only reality. Reality is the reality that they perceive, it is them he has to please, or appease, or deceive, or maneuver, or manipulate, or obey. It is in the measure that he is successful in this task that he is going to gauge his efficacy, his efficacy in living.”

Since he has been alienated from objective reality, he does not have any measure of the truth, of what is right, or of personal value. Branden adds: “his most urgent need is to satisfy the expectations, the conditions, the demands, the terms, and the values of others. The temporary decrease in anxiety that he experiences at the face of uncertainty is produced by the approval of others; this is the substitution of his self-esteem.”

For Branden “social metaphysics” is the psychological syndrome that characterizes the person who holds that the mind of another, and not reality itself, is his psycho-epistemological frame of reference. We believe this is Cuba’s psychosociological illness. (Nathaniel Branden. *The psychology of Self-esteem*. Bantam Books, 1969, pp.178-188.)

The conformist is a very common type of social metaphysician. He is the person that accepts the world and their already made values and does not even ask himself. Why? What is the truth? What the others say is the truth. What is done well? What another may believe is well done. How should I live? How everyone else lives. Why work in order to live? Because you think you are supposed to do it. Why have children? Because you think you are supposed to. Why participate in the activities organized by the party? Please we are not to begin talking about politics. We may offend somebody, or even worse we could go to jail.

“No sooner are we born,” Martí said,

“already standing next to the cradle, as large and strong blindfolds prepared in hand, the philosophies, the religions, the passions of our parents, the political systems. And they tie him, and saddle him, and man is already, for his entire life on Earth, a bridled horse.”

According to Branden, this is a person for whom reality is the world interpreted by his fellow man in any given social environment, the person whose sense of identity and personal value emanate explicitly from his ability to satisfy the values, terms and expectations of those omniscient and ubiquitous others. I am as you want me to be.

The conformist, said Branden, “is the type of person that offers credibility to the doctrines of determinism and is the ideal candidate to be governed by a tyrant”. Let us recall some of the revolutionary slogans that every child has to repeat in Cuba, in a process of erosion of his own identity and mind the so-called indoctrination or “brainwashing”:



El patriarca [The Patriarch]

Luiz Cruz-Azaceta

“We will be like Che,” ;

“Comandante, what are your orders?”

Nevertheless, according to Branden this is the least complicated type of social-metaphysician. He asks: “What happens to the social metaphysician if the challenge to his survival is too difficult? Then a new line of neurotic defenses and self-evasive practices are developed in order to protect his self-esteem from total collapse. This type of person is the most ambitious for power. (Branden, p.188).