

The Dictator Novel in the Age of Trump

"Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit." Chinua Achebe

Of the thousand and one reactions of horror and shock following the illegitimate victory and first months of the Trump administration, one of the most interesting variations I have heard is: "at least there will be [good art](#)." The hypothesis is that dangerous political years inspire greater art than do times of relative safety. That this is an unverifiable consolation distracts from the obvious point: Why can't we have good art and good politics?

The Dictator in Context

The installation of Trump as president has prompted endless historical comparisons to various dictators and fascists. As I previously argued [here](#), I firmly believe that Trump hews closely to many of the methods, if not always the ideology (it is apparent that Trump has no agenda beyond his self-aggrandizement), of what Umberto Eco labeled "[ur-Fascism](#)". Even before the emergence of Trump I wrote of how the Republican Party's rejection of democratic principles was ultimately a [road to fascism](#). The difficulty in such definitions is that, like unhappy families, dictators, tyrants, and fascists are all infelicitous in their own unique ways. I would still argue that Trump shares certain characteristics and methods with Mussolini, Idi Amin, and yes, Hitler (this is a serious and relevant historical parallel rather than an *ad hominem* attack, thus Godwin's Law does not apply). On the other hand, Trump is also different from every other past dictator since, to give one example, he rose from outside the military or political

ranks and was merely a failed businessman and con man who played the reality TV character of a successful businessman. Trump's peculiar brand of power politics is *sui generis*, but our understanding of the Trump phenomenon is very clearly rooted in our reading of history and literature.

While it is necessary to explore the parallels to Trump in American history (the closest are [Andrew Jackson](#), whose portrait Trump placed in the Oval Office, and of course [Nixon](#)) and European history (there are many; regarding Italian politics, to give but one example, a mixture of Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi seems apt), I think the most appropriate family resemblance to Trump is found in the Latin American *caudillo*, or charismatic strongman. The reasons for this include: 1) personal enrichment as the only constant and coherent ideology, 2) the need for constant praise and adulation, 3) the exaggerated chauvinism, misogyny and virility, 4) the carefully controlled image, 5) the promotion of family members and cronies to key political positions, 6) the claims of a singular ability to interpret the "people's will", 7) the appropriation of kitsch over culture, 8) the use of the epithet "enemies of the state" for anyone who criticizes or opposes his will, 9) the total disregard of all existing democratic values and institutions, as well as 10) disdain for writers and intellectuals of every stripe (who are always among the first to be [persecuted](#)). Many of these traits overlap with more overt right-wing or left-wing ideological positions held by dictators in modern history, but all depend solely on authoritarianism for the sake of power itself rather than any particular ideology. Of course, there are ways that Trump differs from the typical *caudillo*, such as lack of a popular nickname (the Chief, the Supreme, Generalissimo, etc.) and a glaring lack of exquisitely adorned military uniforms (give him time, though—he might [come around](#)). The cult of personality that is another universal trait of *caudillismo* easily lends itself to each individual dictator giving his name to the political system, *i.e.* Peronism, Trujillism,

Trumpism, Chavism, etc, and requiring personal loyalty to the dictator himself over any other abstract value like the constitution, the laws, or the welfare of the people. The various labels of dictator, tyrant, despot, strongman, autocrat, autarch, president for life, and the corresponding adjectives for the type of government (authoritarian, totalitarian, kleptocratic, oligarchic, etc.) are all, in my opinion, synonyms differing only in context and nuance. The phenomenon of the *caudillo* is always located in an American (in the general sense of the Western hemisphere) context, and has a history in almost every Latin American country going back 200 years to when Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín threw off the Spanish yoke.

The Myth of the Benevolent Dictator

Are there any upsides to being ruled by a dictator? There is an old chestnut that says “at least Mussolini got the trains to run on time”. This is probably more propaganda than historical fact, even though he certainly did drain the swamps around Rome (finishing a plan drawn up by the Emperor Claudius). Hitler is sometimes given credit for the Autobahn. Stalin gets credit for...(let me get back to you on that one). In fact, it is inevitable that the apologists of any dictatorship will cite the improvement of public infrastructure and massive building projects, as well as the order, stability, and national sovereignty such regimes bring. There is a lot of truth to these claims. After all, even a budding dictator of below average intelligence (like Trump) would quickly figure out that he (because always men) needs to supplement constant state-run propaganda with big visual signs of progress to pacify and distract the little people under his thumb. Likewise with order and stability—if these are the highest ideals of a regime, they are relatively easy to enact by empowering the secret police and suppressing all individual freedoms.

Another occasional positive side effect of dictators is the unilateral protection of the environment, seen for example in the Dominican Republic under the arch-*caudillo* Rafael Trujillo and his authoritarian-leaning successor, Joaquín Balaguer (Jared Diamond [discussed](#) the latter in depth in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*). Is stopping deforestation and pollution and aggressively protecting natural areas worth tolerating autocratic rule? I think not, especially since we can achieve those goals democratically (as the countries of northern Europe and Costa Rica demonstrate). However practical or progressive a dictator may be in one particular facet of governance, there are always mountains of horrors piled up on the opposite side, clearly disproving the notion that it is ever beneficial for the host country to be under the dictator's heel. Have there ever been any historical instances of a mostly benevolent dictator?

In the original practice of the Roman Republic, a dictator was summoned only during the most urgent national crises and given complete control of the military and government, but only for six months. This temporal limitation seems like the best way to ward off the universal corruption of power. Kemal Atatürk was the father of the modern Turkish state, liberating it from European militaries after World War One and ushering in centuries worth of reforms in a couple decades. I ranked him [here](#) as an overall beneficial dictator, doing the best for his country, with few downsides (one-party rule, authoritarianism) that could not be avoided in that context. Even more exemplary is Giuseppe Garibaldi, the [superhumanly heroic](#) leader of Italian Unification. He led from the front in hundreds of battles and dozens of wars over 50 years, always in the name of freedom and what we would today call "human rights". In his most famous and important campaign, he singlehandedly conquered the southern half of Italy with 1000 men and a few rusty carbines, ruled as a dictator (when the word was still used in the Roman sense) for six months instituting many reforms, before voluntarily handing power to the new king of

Italy in the name of national unity, and retiring to farm on his private island. The hardest thing to get right in any transition from dictatorship to democracy is the peaceful transfer of power. That is why early Roman dictators like Cincinnatus, who gave up power and returned to his *latifundia*, or George Washington, who chose to finish his life as a civilian farmer instead of serving as president-king for life, are so celebrated by later generations (even though Cincinnatus was also violently opposed to the plebian reforms, and Washington was also a slave-owner). It is rare in the annals of history to find leaders uncorrupted by power, or who give up absolute power willingly. That is why the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, limiting the president to two terms, is so important, and why, at a minimum, there should be term limits for every executive office in every country. Only when a precedent for this has been set in a country can it begin to dream of a time without dictators.

Trump the Would-be Dictator

Trump's open disdain and flagrant assault on hallowed democratic principles like the rule of law, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press is a deeply disturbing spectacle which clearly demonstrates his authoritarianism. Most dictators have their own particular brand, and Trump uses a strange mix of hyper-partisan, hyper-individualistic, privatized pseudo-fascism that prizes winning (though not necessarily violence) as the highest good, and total humiliation for those who are not "winners". Not exactly Nazi rhetoric, but there is a family resemblance. Dictatorships do not happen overnight. There is a [strong case](#) to be made that America has been creeping towards authoritarianism for 40 years, and thus the reasons for the installation of Trump are many and varied (and have little to do with his skills as a politician). Kitsch, another universal trait of totalitarian regimes, is a powerful tool to control and subvert real independent thinking with

sentimentality. Milan Kundera famously discussed the role of kitsch in the Communist bloc in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, saying: “When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme.” Mike Carson [has argued](#) on this website how ubiquitous kitsch is in American society. Maximillian Alvarez [has written](#) that even my identification of Trump as a fascist can be seen as a type of counterproductive cathartic use of kitsch.



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No matter the underlying causes of the illegitimate Trump election, even an openly authoritarian president backed by a cowardly Congress cannot unilaterally dismantle 240 years of republican government. Therefore, there are still reasons to be hopeful about the outcome of this [constitutional crisis](#). One is the incompetence and corruption of Trump and his administration. Their conspicuous weaknesses will prevent them from accomplishing some policy goals, and could sooner or later lead to impeachment. Another is the unprecedented unpopularity of Trump (almost every dictator had authentic claims to mass popular support at least in the early years, something Trump certainly lacks) and the highly energized resistance movement by the majority of Americans that will in turn greatly reduce this aspiring tyrant’s capacity to subvert

the U.S. Constitution. This counts not only for the big-ticket marches, protests, and lawsuits, but even for a more [profound reawakening](#) to the values of civic participation in civil society, and widespread grassroots involvement in things like discussion circles, teach-ins, and reading groups. Indeed, the burgeoning interest and sales of classic dystopian novels like *1984*, *The Plot Against America*, [It Can't Happen Here](#), and *The Handmaid's Tale*, to name four of the most famous, is a sign of these troubled times. As important and relevant as these English language novels are, I would argue that there is a less well-known but even more relevant genre: the Dictator Novel.

The Dictator Novel

The *novela de dictadore* is a sub-genre with wholly Latin American roots, and drawing on the long history of *caudillismo* in the former Spanish American Empire. Most of these countries have spent many more years as dictatorships than democracies, and by my rough count there are at least 50 examples in Latin American history of strongmen (yes, all men, though Eva Peron comes the closest to being a strongwoman; it is actually unsurprising that I cannot find any examples of female dictators in world history). The development of the Dictator Novel was a reaction by the writers of Latin America to the endless parade of *caudillos* preying on their people like wolves guarding flocks of sheep. The first example is the 1845 novel *Facundo* by Domingo Sarmiento, which is a criticism of Juan Manuel de Rosas of Argentina, the first major *caudillo* and a model for many subsequent ones. The sub-genre became especially popular since the Latin American Literary Boom of the 1960's and 70's.

Mario Vargas Llosa's 2000 novel *The Feast of the Goat* recounts the horrific totalitarian regime of Rafael "el Jefe" Trujillo, who made the Dominican Republic into his personal fiefdom from 1930-1961. Vargas Llosa, a master storyteller who won the 2010

Nobel Prize for Literature, was also a political activist who ran for president of Peru in 1990. He is therefore well-placed to write about politics and dictators in Latin America. I first encountered the horrors of the Trujillo regime via Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which I would consider a semi-dictator novel, about how the protagonist is the recipient of a multi-generational curse caused by the rapaciousness (literal and figurative) of Generalissimo Trujillo.

☒ Vice President Nixon and
Rafael "the Chief"
Trujillo in 1958.

The Feast of the Goat is concurrently told from three perspectives each revolving around Trujillo's last day before being assassinated. One part is told by Urania Cabral, the daughter of a disgraced official of Trujillo who visits the Dominican Republic for the first time in 35 years. One part recounts the harrowing tale of the conspirators who kill Trujillo and seek to evade capture and torture. The final part enters in the mind of Trujillo himself as he goes through every minute of his final day, interrogating and humiliating ministers, while also revealing his own most humiliating secrets to the reader.

The main character, Urania Cabral, tells her family the story of why she never returned to the Dominican Republic, ending in a harrowing climax at the long-dead dictator's country mansion: "I don't think the word 'kitsch' existed yet...Years later, whenever I heard it or read it, and knew what extremes of bad taste and pretension it expressed, Mahogany House always came to mind. A kitsch monument." The tyrant's horrors reach deep, and continue to haunt long after death.

Trujillo was certainly one of the most prototypical of the caudillos, both by his beliefs and his actions. At one point

Vargas Llosa's version of Trujillo says: "I don't have time to read the bullshit intellectuals write. All those poems and novels. Matters of state are too demanding." Then later, echoing every dictator ever, he says to Balaguer, his puppet president and unbeknownst successor: "I've always had a low opinion of intellectuals and writers. On the scale of merit, the military occupy first place... Then the campesinos... Then the bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, businessmen. Writers and intellectuals come last. Even below the priests. You're an exception, Dr. Balaguer. But the rest of them! A pack of dogs." That these words were put into the Generalissimo's mouth by a notable writer and intellectual is part of the irony. One can easily imagine Trump expressing the same sentiment, if much less coherently and eloquently.

One of the most nightmarish aspects of living under a dictator is the vague idea that his reign will never end, or will swallow up entire generations like Saturn devouring his children, rendering the future well-nigh hopeless. This is the central theme of the 1975 dictator novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature and the most esteemed Latin American writer. In an unnamed country, the unnamed Patriarch has been the sole ruler for nearly 200 years. The novel is a poetic meditation on the dangers and solitude of absolute power. At the beginning, the superannuated tyrant's corpse is found in the presidential palace, but his allies, the people, and finally the reader, are led to wonder if this is really the unimaginable death of the eternal leader, or merely one more of his ruses to root out enemies and tighten his stranglehold on power. Absolute power is absolutely corrupting, and frightening to imagine. The lengths to which the dictator must go in order to gain and hold power for decades always leads inexorably to a regime of terror and torture. The Patriarch reminisces about past actions he has taken to defeat one of his foes or increase the awe of the people, but the narrative is not explicit about the details of this dark-side regime.

Vargas Llosa's novel is a much more straightforward prose account of such a regime, while García Márquez's deals more obliquely and poetically with the nightmare of a never-ending totalitarian ruler.

There are a great many dictator novels, just a few more of which I will mention. The Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos wrote *I, the Supreme* (1974) about the first dictator of Paraguay, Dr. Francia (whom Adrian Bonenberger has written about on this website [here](#)). Dr. Francia was a populist despot who isolated his country from the outside world, both for trade and immigration, and cracked down on all political opposition and criticism (sound familiar?). Bastos' novel is widely considered an attack on the Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled for 35 years over a repressive regime and forbid the Bastos to return to Paraguay after the novel's publication.

✖ Simon Bolivar,
"the Liberator"

García Márquez wrote a second dictator novel, *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), about the last month of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of South America whose rule once extended to Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Bolívar has most often been treated as a universal and mythical hero, a portrayal that García Márquez does away with. He shows the Liberator with all his defects, dying prematurely, scheming for a return to power, howling about betrayals by his enemies. It is a powerful meditation on power and death. Likewise, Vargas Llosa wrote another dictator novel, the monumental *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), which describes life in Peru during the dictatorship of Manuel Odría.

While the Dictator Novel has its roots in Latin American history, its impact has spread to other continents. Two

examples from Africa are Chinua Achebe's 1987 *Anthills of the Savannah*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 2006 *Wizard of the Crow*. Both of these novels are excellent works of fiction from two of the most eminent African writers, showing both the horror and black humor that can paradoxically be found in the dictator's regime. Like the *caudillo*, the typical African strongman also has a love for buffoonish uniforms, which is possibly the only thing separating Trump from their ranks.

One final aspect of the dictator novel is the constant presence and impact of United States imperialism, whether implicit or explicit. Insofar as the U.S. does intervene in Latin American politics, it is virtually always by means of the C.I.A. and its bag of dirty tricks. For example, the precariousness of the last two years of Trujillo's regime before his assassination can be directly attributed to loss of American patronage, C.I.A. agitation and material support for the assassins, and threat of invasion by the Marines. Trujillo, originally trained by the Marines himself, always considered himself the United States' strongest supporter in the Western Hemisphere, and was long treated by the Americans as an important and reliable bulwark against Communism. It is either ironic or just sad that the same organization that is responsible for propping up so many dictators and overthrowing or assassinating so many others in the name of "American interests", is now one of the principle means of stopping the new would-be American dictator. If Trump had read any dictator novels (even though he is functionally illiterate), he might have been able to understand that waging a war on the entire press as well as the many powerful intelligence communities is the wrong way to consolidate power. It is a war that he will lose decisively, we can be sure, but Trump's bungling experiment in tyranny have exposed the flaws in the American political system, possibly paving the way for future exploitation by a younger and much more competent aspiring dictator. From now on, we must always be on guard, never taking for granted the inevitable survival of our democratic

principles, and never forgetting the lessons of historical and literary cautionary tales.

Conclusion

There is something very disturbing, for me and millions of others, in the fact that we are veering towards an outcome we have been warned against by our literary prophets (not to mention our reading of history), and it is a message people are taking seriously. Two plus two is four, the emperor has no clothes, and the dictator is neither omnipotent nor immortal. For all the comparisons to the Nazi rise to power, one advantage we have as historical latecomers is our awareness of the past, our vigilance against a [Reichstag fire](#)-type event, and our will to resist the encroachment of the totalitarian dystopias we have read about. The power of the pen is real—satire and [mockery](#) of dictators are some of the best ways for writers to fight for freedom, as is the relentless reportage of the truth for journalists. I do not believe that all art is or should always be political. The artist is free to transcend or vie with the bounds of politics and history in her own search for beauty and meaning. However, there are times when, as Hannah Arendt said about 1933, it is no longer possible to be indifferent. We are living in one of those times when no one, including the artist, can afford to be indifferent.