

**From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez**  
*Intellectuals and a Century of Political  
Hero Worship*

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, political dictators were not only popular in their own countries, but were also admired by numerous highly educated and idealistic Western intellectuals. The objects of this political hero-worship included Benito Mussolini, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and more recently Hugo Chavez, among others. This book seeks to understand the sources of these misjudgements and misperceptions, the specific appeals of particular dictators, and the part played by their charisma, or pseudo-charisma. It sheds new light not only on the political disposition of numerous Western intellectuals – such as Martin Heidegger, Eric Hobsbawm, Norman Mailer, Ezra Pound, Susan Sontag and George Bernard Shaw – but also on the personality of those political leaders who encouraged, and in some instances helped to design, the cult surrounding their rise to dictatorship.

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## Preface

This book continues to explore several of my long-standing and converging interests. They include totalitarianism, communist systems, intellectuals and politics, the relationship between the personal and political, between political ideals and practices, the spiritual problems of modernity, and the apparently limitless capacity of idealistic human beings, notably intellectuals, to engage in wishful thinking and substantial political misjudgments.<sup>1</sup> I should hasten to add that the generalizations and propositions that follow in this book apply only to an undetermined but very visible and vocal *portion* of Western intellectuals. In the absence of opinion and other surveys addressed to “intellectuals” these proportions cannot be determined and quantified. Many intellectuals had and have political attitudes and sympathies quite different from those examined in this book (see also Chapter 8, pp. 308–309).

In addition to the interests sketched above, much of my work over my entire professional life involved the broader issues of illusions and reality, theory and practice, as well as deception and self-deception. These interests found expression not only in my writings about the political illusions of Western intellectuals but also in other realms of illusions: political propaganda, commercial advertising, secular religions, the “cult of personality” (deification of political leaders), and most recently in the

<sup>1</sup> It is an interest I share with Orwell, whose “main concern was the gullibility of the intelligentsia. How could so many educated minds believe all that fantasy and falsification?” (Robert Conquest in John Rodden ed.: *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, Cambridge 2007, 129).

contemporary American pursuit of romantic love<sup>2</sup> – an apolitical and far less destructive pursuit of illusions.

The major earlier expression of my interests noted above may be found in *Political Pilgrims*, first published in 1981. It was written during the 1970s and as such was influenced by my experiences of that period, and its dominant social-political movements, observed in academic settings (Harvard and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst). Some readers may consider this book a follow-up of *Pilgrims* and in certain respects they would be correct, given the continuity of my preoccupations. But there are also substantial differences between these two books and their subject matter.

*Political Pilgrims* examined the appeals and attractions various communist systems had for many Western intellectuals. It included only brief discussions of the appeals of the leaders and founders of these systems. By contrast, the present volume focuses on attitudes toward and perceptions of the leaders of these systems that in many instances could be characterized as hero worship.

Second, and more importantly, the present study was broadened to include (among the political systems that impressed favorably groups of Western intellectuals) not only communist states but also Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, as well as several contemporary authoritarian regimes and their leaders of varied ideological persuasion: Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Omar Torrijos of Panama, the Kim dynasty of North Korea.

There have been several reasons for the expansion of my interests and the attendant shift of emphasis from systems to leaders. In the first place, while much has been written about the left-wing sympathies of Western intellectuals, much less has been known and written about corresponding attitudes (far more short-lived) toward other totalitarian and authoritarian systems such as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, among others. Given my general interest in the political attitudes and judgments of intellectuals, expanding the types of political systems they were attracted to promised further insight into the roots of their disposition that culminated in the misjudgments I explored in the more limited historical context of *Political Pilgrims*.

The new emphasis on “political hero worship,” or, more precisely, the attractions of charismatic and often deified leaders, was intended to

<sup>2</sup> See my *Extravagant Expectations: New Ways to Find Romantic Love in America*, Lanham MD 2011.



highlight the secular-religious components of the attitudes I have been interested in for a long time. I expected that comparing the converging appeals of leaders of different political systems legitimated by different ideologies would lend support to the idea that the attitudes of the intellectuals here examined had more of a religious, or secular-religious, than political inspiration. A similar orientation can be readily identified in the religious-spiritual aspects of contemporary political beliefs and attitudes most strikingly found in the upsurge of radical-fundamentalist Islamist movements.

Another political-cultural phenomenon relevant to this study is the recent (winter 2015–spring 2016) popularity of Donald Trump among American voters. Arguably, these attitudes could also be classified as hero worship and as such deserve at least a brief comment in this study.

Unlike the figures dealt with in this book, Trump had no political power, no ideology, no discernible ideals, and no state-sponsored propaganda apparatus at his disposal. Nor did he appeal to intellectuals. At the same time, his popularity and admiration closely resemble the attitudes stimulated by the charismatic dictators dealt with in this book. It is noteworthy, as well as dismaying, that even in a democratic political culture, such as that of America, millions of people came to admire, support, and vote for an individual such as Trump, notwithstanding his complete lack of credentials or qualifications for the high office he has sought. It is equally remarkable that the same substantial portion of the population chose to ignore, or overlook, his numerous highly unappealing personal qualities – the inflated ego, his endless bragging, intolerance, authoritarian temperament, coarse language, lack of self-control, and demonization of opponents, among others.

Like genuinely charismatic figures, Trump was able to mobilize the most profoundly alienated, embittered, and frustrated segments of the population, who were ready to embrace an individual whose appeal rests solely on his boundless self-regard and willingness to make a wide variety of outlandish promises, offering simple, poorly articulated solutions to a wide variety of social, economic, and political grievances. Trump's wealth has also impressed many Americans who believe that great wealth is self-evident proof of impressive personal qualities.<sup>3</sup> Such a deeply internalized reverence for wealth, regardless of its sources and the character of those possessing it, helps to explain why his endless bragging and posturing

<sup>3</sup> But Trump is not exactly a self-made man having inherited huge amounts from his father – the foundation of his real estate empire.

failed to make a poor impression on his supporters. Many of those feeling deprived and victimized by the social system have been ready to identify with an individual such as Trump – rich, aggressive, and claiming to be a powerful supporter of the underdog.

Trump shares the key attribute of genuinely charismatic figures, namely an immense and irrational self-confidence that is a substitute for any specific credential or qualification for the political office he seeks. His crude and aggressive rhetoric, unembarrassed, vocal intolerance, and grandiose promises respond to the needs and grievances of the least educated, most frustrated, and most embittered portion of the electorate. As David Brooks recently wrote: “Trump’s supporters aren’t looking for a political process to address their needs. They are looking for a superhero. As the political scientist Matthew MacWilliams found, the one trait that best predicts whether you’re a Trump supporter is how high you score on tests that measure authoritarianism.”<sup>4</sup> The Trump phenomenon reminds us that political hero worship cannot be relegated to the past.

Although the focus of this book is the Western intellectuals’ perception and admiration of various dictators, it was necessary to provide some information about the actual character and policies of the dictators in order to compare and contrast, as far as possible, the perceptions and images with psychological and biographical realities. The latter substantially, often spectacularly, diverged from the images and perceptions entertained by the intellectuals in question.

While it was not my intention to dwell on the nature of the political systems the dictators presided over – to avoid duplication of the topics dealt with at length in *Political Pilgrims* – it would have been difficult to analyze attitudes toward the dictators without reference to the major characteristics of the political and social systems they created and dominated. There was no danger of repetition when writing about Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy and the other authoritarian systems and their leaders (discussed in Chapter 7) that were not dealt with in *Political Pilgrims*.

I have always been particularly interested in the respective influence (on the character of these systems) of their official ideology and the personality of their supreme leader. This study confirms that ideas and ideologies had considerable influence on the dictators and the elite groups sharing and supporting their power. I have also been curious (from an early age)

<sup>4</sup> David Brooks: “A Governing Cancer of Our Time,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2016, A23.

about the part played by coercion and political violence in the maintenance and persistence of these systems, and the following will also shed some light on this matter.

I fully concur with an Iranian social scientist who had this to say about the part played by ideas vs. coercion in the maintenance of dictatorships:

academic discussions of dictatorship ignore the stark reality of brute force and instead focus on *ideologies*; academics would have one believe that the people remain downtrodden because they misperceive the situation and directly or indirectly perpetuate their own powerlessness ... The disproportionate focus on ideas arises from the fact that many academics who have written about dictatorships have never lived in a dictatorship, nor have they experienced how people can be painfully aware of suffocating repression while living in a dictatorship but not be able to say or do anything about this terrifying reality because they fear torture, imprisonment and assassination ... These fears are justified.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Moghaddam and I share some personal experiences that help to account for our views as we both had lived in dictatorships, he in a theocratic one, myself in the Stalinist-communist variety.

There were several occasions over a long period of time when I benefited from exposing ideas related to this book to various audiences. In November 2001 I was a discussant at a Liberty Fund conference on “Communism and Intellectuals” in Krakow, Poland (all participants at Liberty Fund conferences are discussants). In November 2006 I spoke about the “Political Delusions of Western Intellectuals” at the Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington, NY; in March 2007 I gave a talk at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, entitled “Attraction and Abandonment: Political Morality and Communist Ideals.” In May 2010 I gave a lecture in Bucharest at the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism, entitled “Temptations of Communism and Western Intellectuals”; in November 2012 I participated in another Liberty Fund conference in Indianapolis on “Intellectuals and Society”; in March 2013 I gave a talk on “Intellectuals and Dictators” at a conference held at Boston College devoted to the topic of “Dreams of Total Power”; in February 2014 I gave a talk at the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies at Stanford University on the same topic. In September 2014 I addressed once more the same topic at a colloquium of the Sociology Department of the Central European University in Budapest. In September 2016 I gave a

<sup>5</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam: *The Psychology of Dictatorship*, Washington DC 2013, 4.

lecture on the subject of this book at the Hungarian Academy of Science in Budapest.

Vladimir Tismaneanu helped to inspire this volume by inviting me several years ago to contribute a chapter to the volume he was going to edit on totalitarian dictatorships. I chose to write about intellectuals and dictators. The volume he edited has yet to be published.

I am grateful for the instructive and thoughtful comments, advice, and encouragement of Daniel Benveniste, Patrick Clawson, Anthony Daniels, Jorge Dominguez, Jeffrey Herf, Fred Hiatt, Christopher Hurn, John Kekes, Peter Kenz, Jonathan Mirsky, Norman Naimark, Richard Pipes, Laura Tartakoff, Ezra Vogel, Arthur Waldron, and Richard Wolin. Each of them read various parts of the manuscript related to their expertise and interests. The lengthy written comments of Jeffrey Herf, Arthur Waldron, and Richard Wolin were particularly helpful. I am pleased to note here that close to forty years ago Jorge Dominguez had also commented on parts of *Political Pilgrims*. Doubtless, all these responses improved various aspects of the book, even if not all of the advice of the readers was taken.

Peter Kenz and Mark Kramer read and endorsed the detailed proposal Cambridge University Press requested. I greatly appreciate their support. I am also grateful to Alexandra Sprague for her help in formatting the manuscript and miscellaneous computer problem-solving and Gene Fisher for solving problems resulting from my using a computer program different from that of the publisher.