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Anamaria Fălăuș

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Résumé de l'article

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Logiques médiatiques et infortunes de la vertu / Media logics and misfortunes of virtue / Lógica mediática e infortunios de la virtud

Totalitarianism and the questionable legitimation of conflict through propaganda in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

Anamaria Fălăuș

Université Technique Cluj-Napoca, Centre Universitaire Nord Baia Mare, Roumanie
anamariafelecan@gmail.com

Le roman graphique Persepolis de Marjane Satrapi est loin d'être un simple récit du passage à l'âge adulte. L'œuvre autobiographique, projetée sur fond d'un pays au climat sociopolitique hostile, raconte l'histoire d'une jeune fille qui grandit dans l'Iran révolutionnaire, un endroit où les arrestations et la torture sont des événements habituels. Le roman graphique Maus, d'Art Spiegelman, retrace l'histoire de l'Holocauste vue à travers les yeux du personnage principal, Vlădek, qui juxtapose les détails de la vie quotidienne à l'énormité de l'expérience. Cet article analyse le contexte social, historique et culturel qui a conduit à la révolution iranienne et à la guerre Irak-Iran, d'une part, et à la plus grande extermination des Juifs de l'histoire, d'autre part. Il illustre comment les mensonges, les idées fausses et les actions meurtrières peuvent être justifiés par des vertus ou de prétendues bonnes intentions.

Mots-clés : totalitarisme, fondamentalisme, propagande, ancrage historique.

Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel Persepolis is far from being a simple coming-of-age narrative. The autobiographical tale, projected onto the background of a relatively hostile country, tells the story of a young girl growing up in revolutionary Iran, a place where threats of violence, arrest, and torture are everyday fears. Art Spiegelman's graphic novel Maus is the story of the Holocaust seen through the eyes of the main character, Vlădek, which juxtaposes the minutiae of day-to-day life with the enormity of the experience. This paper analyzes the social, historical, and cultural context that led to the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq-Iran war, on the one hand, and to the greatest extermination of the Jews in history, on the other. It aims to prove how lies, misconception, and murderous actions can be justified by virtues or allegedly good intentions.

Keywords: totalitarianism, fundamentalism, propaganda, historical background

La novela gráfica Persepolis de Marjane Satrapi está lejos de ser un simple relato del paso a la edad adulta. La obra autobiográfica, proyectada en un país de clima sociopolítico hostil, cuenta la historia de una joven que crece en el Irán revolucionario, un lugar donde las detenciones y la tortura son hechos habituales. La novela gráfica Maus, de Art Spiegelman, narra la historia del Holocausto vista a través de los ojos del personaje principal, Vlădek, que juxtapone los detalles de la vida cotidiana a la enormidad de la experiencia. Este artículo analiza el contexto social, histórico y cultural que condujo a la revolución iraní y a la guerra Irak-Irán, por una parte, y al mayor exterminio de los judíos de la historia, por otra. Ilustra cómo las mentiras, las ideas falsas y las acciones letales pueden ser justificadas por virtudes o supuestas buenas intenciones.

Palabras clave : totalitarismo, fundamentalismo, propaganda, anclaje histórico.

Instead of an introduction

Both, Art Spiegelman's memoir *Maus* based on the author's discussions with his father about surviving World War II and the Nazi concentration camps, and Marjane Satrapi's autobiographic narrative *Persepolis* recounting the memories of a young girl raised and matured throughout the Shah's dictatorship, in a Revolutionary Iran and during the Islamic Republic represent two of the most representative graphic memoirs that exemplify two important totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

Written over a period of 13 years, Art Spiegelman's autobiographic narrative *Maus* is also one of the most appreciated graphic novels of all time. Published by Pantheon Press in two volumes (the first one - *My Father Bleeds History* in 1986, and the second one - *And Here My Troubles Began* in 1991) *Maus* started as a serialized narrative. As a Pulitzer Prize-winning book (1992), it has received endless editorial acclaim, being considered "the most affecting and successful narratives ever done about the Holocaust," (*The Wall Street Journal*) a "loving documentary and brutal fable, a mix of compassion and stoicism [that] sums up the experience of the Holocaust with as much power and as little pretension as any other work I can think of." (*The New Republic*) However, the book's publication also led to some controversy and criticism, posing, as far as Thomas Doherty (1996, p. 69) is concerned, "an unsettling aesthetic and scholarly challenge" rooted primarily in the format of the book that was, from the very beginning, questioned as being appropriate or not. Doherty approaches the problem of the book's format by first identifying its downfalls. He begins by stating that "from a traditionalist vantage point, the readily accessible, easy on-the-eye comic-book format of *Maus* would in itself disqualify and indict the work. Spiegelman's medium is associated with the madcap, the childish, the trivial. By its very nature it seems ill-equipped for the moral seriousness and tonal restraint that have been demanded of Holocaust art" (1996, p. 71). But the graphic quality of the book made it "well-suited to a confrontation with Nazism and the Holocaust", continues the author (p. 71). "The medium is not the message, but in the case of *Maus* the medium is bound up with the message, with the ideology of Nazism and the artist's critique of it" (Doherty, 1996, p. 71). The same problem, i.e. the medium of production is also noted by Linda Hutcheon who quotes Art Spiegelman's reaction when confronted to the question of the validity of the format in which he chose to represent the gravity of Holocaust.

The language I speak is comics. I'm a rotten ballet dancer. So, it would never be possible for me to make *Maus* as a ballet. There's something frightening about eliciting an aesthetic response built on so much suffering. The dangers have to be acknowledged while you are working. It's tricky. If you hear someone has taken on the genocide of the Jews in comics form, it sounds like a terrible idea. But using animals allows you to defamiliarize the events, to reinhabit them in a fresh way because they are coming at you in a language you are not used to hearing. (Spiegelman as cited in Hutcheon, 1999, p.7)

Thomas Doherty (1996, p. 70), nevertheless, favors Spiegelman's choice: "in the hands of cartoonist Spiegelman, a conceit obscene on its face – a Holocaust comic book – became solemn and moving, absorbing and enlightening."

Beyond categorization

Leaving aside the controversy that surrounds the suitability of the book's format or its capacity to defy categorization, one cannot separate this graphic memoir from the historical background on which the entire narrative is constructed, i.e. the extermination of the Jews during World War II.

Moving on to Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis*, one should notice that since its publication in 2003, the book has attracted a "degree of attention that does not compare to the

reception of other recent books by diasporic Iranian women” (Naghbi & O’Malley, 2005, p. 224). Alongside *Maus*, it is considered one of the best representatives of the graphic memoir genre, and similar to the Holocaust memoir, it “combines political history and memoir, portraying a country’s 20th-century upheavals through the story of one family” (Eberstadt, 2021). Just like *Maus*, *Persepolis* defies easy categorization. It is representative of “gendered graphic memoir” (Rumnong, 2015, p. 14) as it manages to portray/represent Iranian Muslim women under the Islamic Republic of Iran, being also discussed or analyzed in relation to human rights issues (Ezzatikarami & Ameri, 2019). As a young woman’s exilic experience, it tackles issues of the “construction and negotiation of identity [...] including hybridity, liminality, and interrogations of the third space created in and by exile” (Malek, 2006, p. 354). According to Ann Miller (2011, p. 40), “much of the critical writing on Satrapi has focused on her situation as a transnational subject,” this position of liminality being related to the author’s choice of a comic strip as a medium of production, “not only because of its text/image hybridity but also because of the analogy between the interstitial space that she occupies and the gutter, the inter-panel space, on which the discontinuous narration of comic art is founded” (Davis as cited in Miller, 2011, p. 40).

Originally published in French in four volumes between 2000 and 2003, the English translation appeared in two volumes: *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004). If the first volume revolves around the troubles and adversities Marjane and her family members were forced to endure under a theocratic regime that starts right after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and advances through Iraq-Iran War, the second volume focuses on Marji’s Western exilic experience in Vienna and her return home, to Iran where she spends a short but tumultuous time before deciding to move to Europe again (France, this time) and never return to her homeland.

Even if the two graphic memoirs chosen for this discussion and analysis do not share the same historical background, they have something in common: the need to testify against the wrongs of history, to reveal urgently the struggle of man against power, against a centralized control over the freedom, will, or thought of other individuals. The political phenomenon of totalitarianism (which is central to the background that both books were projected on) impacted the history of the 20th century in such a way that the century ended up being considered “the age of extremes” (see Eric Hobsbawm’s book *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, 1996), a series of totalitarian regimes disputing their supremacy: Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and Iranian theocracy.

Theoretical roots of a modern problem

We should begin by defining the concept of totalitarianism and tracing its roots. It seems that around the 1920s, Mussolini’s opponents are the first to use the term “totalitarian” to condemn the Italian dictator’s regime. In his article “Majority and Minority” published in 1923, in *Il Mondo* (May 12), Giovanni Amendola used the word “totalitario” to make reference to the total political power exerted by the fascist state. Nevertheless, Benito Mussolini will use the word himself, but in a positive sense, to mock his opponents, while Giovanni Gentile (the philosopher, fascist politician, and Mussolini’s main ideologist) in his essay “La dottrina del fascismo”¹ (“The Doctrine of Fascism,” 1932) will state:

1. Essay attributed to Benito Mussolini.

the Fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and the universal will of man as a historic entity. ... The Fascist conception of the State is all embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value. Thus understood, Fascism, is totalitarian, and the Fascist State - a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values - interprets, develops, and potentates the whole life of a people.

Besides the Italian fascists, throughout the 1920s, the idea of the absolute power of the state was also addressed by Carl Schmitt, German philosopher, and member of the Nazi Party. He used the term "Totalstaat" in his book *Der Begriff des Politischen* (*The Concept of the Political*, 1996, 2007) in order to describe the legal basis of an all-powerful state, a "total state, which potentially embraces every domain. This results in the identity of state and society" (Schmitt, 2007, p. 22).

However, the first thorough theory on totalitarianism belongs to Hannah Arendt. In her canonical book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958, 1962), the author places the idea of "tribal nationalism" generated by the need to protect the local element, the pure, and the patriotic duty at the root of the concept. "Politically speaking, tribal nationalism always insists that its own people is surrounded by "a world of enemies," "one against all," that a fundamental difference exists between this people and all others. It claims its people to be unique, individual, incompatible with all others, and denies theoretically the very possibility of a common mankind long before it is used to destroy the humanity of man" (Arendt, 1962, p. 227). The same author emphasizes the use of propaganda by extremist ideologies in order to disseminate mythical, prophetic messages (1962, p. 351).

Two other names, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1965), contributed a lot to the understanding and modification of the meaning of the term used initially in the case of fascist regimes. As far as the two writers are concerned (1965, p. 15-16), totalitarian dictatorship resembles "earlier forms of autocracy," the idea of the *total state*, in its all-inclusive, encompassing sense being applicable to a great number of empires and governing systems, but the way in which it developed (i.e. totalitarian dictatorship) was "not intended by those who created it."

Although a "distinctly modern problem," totalitarianism can trace its roots back to Plato's utopian society in which order was to be preserved through strict political control and eugenics, or to the seventeenth century's royalists Thomas Hobbes and Jacques Bossuet who used to advocate "a strong centralized state as a guarantor against chaos in conformity with natural law and biblical precedent" (Litwack).

Raymond Aron (1965, pp. 284-285), one of the most lucid observers of totalitarianism, makes a list of five major characteristics of totalitarian regimes (*Democracy and Totalitarianism*). He starts by identifying the existence of one singular political party and its related ideology that is conferred the status of supreme, absolute truth. These two elements are followed by mass-media's control and censorship, the state's monopoly of the economy, and the politicization of all activities. Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1965, p. 22) came up with a similar list, identifying six features of totalitarian dictatorships: a thoroughly elaborate ideology meant to cover "all vital aspects of man's existence to which everyone living in that society is supposed to adhere, at least passively;" a single mass party led by one person, the "dictator," a system of physical and psychic terror, a monopoly of all means of communication, a similar monopoly of weapons, and a "central control and direction of the entire economy through the bureaucratic coordination of formerly independent corporate entities."

However, besides the above mentioned similarities between different totalitarian regimes, there are also differences worth mentioning that led to the creation of two separate groups: left-wing totalitarian regimes (the communist regimes of Lenin and Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Ir Sen) and right-wing totalitarian regimes (Mussolini's Fascism, Hitler's Nazism, and Komeini's theocracy), the main difference between them being the fact that left-wing regimes have universalist aspirations, addressing people in general, irrespective of their ethnic origin, while right-wing regimes are more particularizing, addressing a certain people or religion only (Weber, 1995, p. 9).

The causes that led to the establishment of totalitarian regimes are either related to human beings' need to distinguish between good and bad and easily accept the categorization "us" versus "them" which facilitates a lack of tolerance, or to various contextual causes, such as economic crises, social tensions, dissatisfaction with political elites, and frustrations caused by marginalization in international relationships. The consequences, however, are varied, starting from violations of human rights and freedoms, use of violence and torture, material loss, increase of intolerance, and misinformation, and culminating in the loss of human lives.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: totalitarianism propelled by the virtue mask of a "steady" future

As we have already mentioned, Art Spiegelman's book defies easy definition or clear-cut categorization. Is it a historical record, a memoir, a comic book or all the above? The book has been analyzed from various angles: a story about the Holocaust as seen through the eyes of the artist's father, Vladek, a tortured relationship between the author and his father, or the relationship between the artist and his art. Using animals instead of human beings, Spiegelman chooses a unique cartoon style to render the story of his parents' survival of the Holocaust, the traumatic experience being constantly juxtaposed with fragments of everyday life where family relations are still problematic.

What this paper attempts to focus on is, nevertheless, the social and historical context that led to the greatest extermination of the Jews in history. In Germany, the National Socialist German Workers' Party – also known as the Nazi Party – came to power in 1933 ("the Nazi Party," 2020). The increase in its popularity came as a consequence of the hyperinflation and economic crisis of 1931-1932, the disintegration of the society's traditional order, and the fragility of political system of the Weimar Republic, as well as the loss of balance resulted from the Treaty of Versailles. The success of the party was based on the dissolution of the idea of democracy at the entire level of the population, the great majority of the Germans, weakened by unemployment and social and economic uncertainty, asking for an order that might guarantee a steady future. Due to its strong roots in German tradition, the authoritarian regime was seen as the best solution for the entire population (Minerbi, 2006, p. 28).

Principles to build that future

The Nazi Party Platform was a 25-point program that Hitler presented on February 24, 1920. It combined "extreme nationalism, racial antisemitism, and socialist concepts with German outrage over the Versailles peace settlement following their defeat in World War I." ("Nazi Party Platform," 2020) Some of the points of the program indicate the fact that the future belongs to the German nation that is essentially Aryan, and Hitler's objective, as its supreme leader, would be the forcible removal of Jews from Germany. As such, point number 4 claimed that "Only members of the

nation may be citizens of the State. Only those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the nation. Accordingly, no Jew may be a member of the nation.” Point number 5 reads: “non-citizens may live in Germany only as guests and must be subject to laws for aliens,” while points 7 and 8 stress the necessity of a country deprived of any foreign influence. Thus, “We demand that the State shall make it its primary duty to provide a livelihood for its citizens. If it should prove impossible to feed the entire population, foreign nationals (non-citizens) must be deported from the Reich,” (7) and “All non-German immigration must be prevented. We demand that all non-Germans who entered Germany after 2 August 1914 shall be required to leave the Reich forthwith” (8) (“Nazi Party Platform,” 2020).

All these highly nationalistic, racist, and anti-Semitic principles will be assumed, defended, and applied by the Nazi Party. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler underlined the importance of “religious faith” and “self sacrifice,” these being the guarantee of any political movement: “the duty of each man [is] to sacrifice his life at all times so that his country might live” (2016, ch. 7). He defined National Socialism as an “apodictic faith” and “church,” the connections to Christianity being a constant of his discourse. “Christianity was not content with erecting an altar of its own. It had first to destroy the pagan altars. It was only in virtue of this passionate intolerance that an apodictic faith could grow up. And intolerance is an indispensable condition for the growth of such a faith” (2016, ch.5). Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda and skillful rhetorician, insisted on the idea that National Socialism would be nothing without “absolute conviction” and “unconditional faith” (Kitchen, 2021, p. 377).

“The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human.” (Adolf Hitler) These words represent the motto of Art Spiegelman’s first volume *My Father Bleeds History* and they encapsulate the central point of Nazi ideology. In *Mein Kampf*, which is considered the *Bible* of Nazism, Hitler makes constant use of words such as “blood,” “race,” claiming that “it is not however by the tie of language, but exclusively by the tie of blood that the members of a race are bound together” (2016, ch. 11). He also discriminates between inferior and superior races, the latter being represented by the Aryan race, a concept designed to fit Nazi ideology and policies. “[I]t was the Aryan alone who founded a superior type of humanity; therefore, he represents the archetype of what we understand by the term: MAN. He is the Prometheus of mankind, from whose shining brow the divine spark of genius has at all times flashed forth, always kindling anew that fire which, in the form of knowledge, illuminated the dark night by drawing aside the veil of mystery and thus showing man how to rise and become master over all the other beings on the earth.” (2016, ch. 11)

Dehumanizing

In Hitler’s opinion, the Jews are not only an inferior race; they actually represent a “non-race”: “in the imagination of our people the Jew is pictured as the incarnation of Satan and the symbol of evil” (2016, ch. 11). Hitler will start to compare Jews with spiders, rats, worms, leeches, vampires or parasites (Quétel, 2018, p. 70), slowly and steadily getting engaged in their harassment and extermination. His fight was considered to be fueled not by a frenetic anti-Semitism but by his messianic destiny: “And so I believe to-day that my conduct is in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator. In standing guard against the Jew, I am defending the handiwork of the Lord” (2016, ch.2).

Interpreting Hitler’s motto (“The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human”) *ad litteram*, Spiegelman uses animals to represent different nations involved in his narrative: the

Jews are mice, the Germans are cats, the Poles are pigs, the Americans are dogs, the French are frogs, and the Gypsies are bees. Through this allegory, the author manages to clearly express the way in which racism was built on biased generalizations and stereotypical constructions, as well as on the intolerance of the “other” that was perceived as different. The faces of the mice are not individualized; the characters are thus reduced to a mass of similar individuals, designed according to the same pattern so that the Nazi ideology might be easily rendered in the pages of the book: an anonymous group whose right to life was denied. However, dehumanizing the Jews by representing them as mice might also represent a technique through which Spiegelman tried to make their persecution more acceptable.

Violence and discrimination are two elements that could be considered defining for the Jews’ life even before the Holocaust, as they had been considered responsible for the outburst of World War I, the defeat of the Reich, the proclamation of the Republic, and the impossibility of purifying the German nation. The Jews’ extermination became synonymous with saving the Aryan identity of the German people.

The Holocaust started with the first measures that the Nazis took against Jews in Germany: the boycott of Jewish-owned shops and businesses (April 1, 1933), Jews’ exclusion from education, commerce, public service, judicial and medical professions, banking, and the passing of the Nuremberg Laws (Reich Citizenship Law – September 15, 1935 and Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor – November 14, 1935), which defined Jews as a specific category of people and deprived them of their citizenship and civil rights. However, there were other discriminatory measures that were added to the already mentioned restrictions: for instance, their exclusion from public places such as parks, cinemas, theatres, the banning of marriages and extramarital relations between Jews and citizens of German blood, Jews being forbidden to employ non-Jewish female subjects in their household, and their isolation in ghettos (“Nuremberg Race Laws,” 2021).

Art Spiegelman begins his father’s life story in Poland, in the town of Czestochowa, close to the border with Germany, where Vladek Spiegelman leads a normal life, buying and selling textiles for a living, and where he marries Anja with whom he moves to Sosnowiec in 1937. A first dramatic impact of the German invasion of Poland (1939) can be sensed in the depreciation of the quality of the everyday life for Jews. “Each of us gets coupons for 8 ounces of bread a day, and a tiny bit of margarine, sugar, and jam per week. That’s all!” (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 75). The dialogue between Vladek and Mr. Ilzecki on his return from the P.O.W. camp in 1940 best exemplifies the way in which Jews were slowly deprived of any financial means: “Vladek Spiegelman!” “Mr. Ilzecki! What are you doing in Sosnowiec?” “Ilzecki used to be a customer of mine – the best tailor in Katowice.” “The Nazis moved me to an apartment here. I make uniforms for their officers ... and suits on the side when I can get the cloth. Are you still in business?” “I don’t know. I just got back from war prison.” “Well, if you get any cloth, come see me. This note will get you past the doorman.” “The note told that I worked with him. Such a paper could be useful to have. I went then to shops that still owed me money from before the war...” “But I can’t pay you! A German runs my place now. I’m lucky just to have a job!” (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 77). Vladek realizes that what makes Jews’ survival more difficult is not only the process of “Aryanization” through which Jewish-owned businesses and property were transferred to non-Jews, but also the lack of working documents that could guarantee them personal and financial security.

By moving them into ghettos, the Germans denied the Jews' right to be part of or belong to a normal society. "Well, for a time it was everything quiet. Then in 1943 came an order: all Jews who are left in Sosnowiec must go to live in an old village nearby called Srodula. And the Poles of Srodula, we Jews had to pay to move them to *our* houses in Sosnowiec ... and here in Srodula would be our ghetto to live ever after. Our family got a cottage – less space than before, but we had at least where to live. Many lived only in the street" (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 105).

Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its allies established more than 44,000 camps and other incarceration sites (including ghettos) ("Nazi Camps," 2020). They were used for a range of purposes including detention of people thought to be enemies of the state – concentration camps (Konzentrationslager), forced labour (Arbeitslager), and mass murder camps (Vernichtungslager). Art Spiegelman's second volume realizes a detailed analysis of the terrifying conditions of Nazi camps and the methods used to purify the superior German nation. "All around was a smell so terrible, I can't explain ... sweetish ... so like rubber burning. And fat" (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 27). Upon their arrival, the prisoners were separated (males and females), deprived of all their possessions, including names, and given numbers to be identified. "They took from us our papers, our clothes, and our hair ... We were cold and we were afraid" (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 25). Food was almost inexistent, so the prisoners were forced to come up with various strategies to survive. "Everybody was so hungry always; we didn't know even what we are doing... In the morning for breakfast, we got only a bitter drink made from roots. One time a day they gave a soup from turnips. And one time each day they gave to us a small bread, crunchy like glass. The flour they mixed with sawdust together – we got one little brick of this what had to last the full day. Most gobbled it right away, but always I saved a half for later. And in the evening, we got a spoiled cheese or jam. If we were lucky a couple times a week, we got a sausage big like two of my fingers. Only this much we got. If you ate how they gave you, it was just enough to die more slowly." (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 49) To the survivors, however, the obsession of food remains, forcing them to adopt strange habits and patterns of behavior: to hide food, to buy more than they need, to be careful never to waste it.

All the details that described Nazi's "Final Solution" were included in this second volume, from the hierarchy that characterized all social relations in these death camps to the minute description of gas chambers which Vladek knew so well as he belonged to the team of tin men that was sent to "take out the pipes and fans for ventilating" (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 70) at the end of the war.

The ghettos, the death trains or the mass murder camps were all instances that Vladek and his wife Anja (along with millions of other people) had to go through as pawns in a game whose rules had previously been established. Although the Nazis knew beforehand what categories of people had to be killed, there were also the diseases and food deprivations that weakened even the most resistant of men indiscriminately. Consequently, survival was more a matter of luck than one of intelligence or worth. This explains how Anja, although weak and fragile, managed to survive while Vladek, almost dies of typhus in Dachau. There was no recipe for life, but a constant fight to avoid death by all means.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*: totalitarianism hidden by the virtuous mask of religious identity

Religion represents an essential element in defining someone's identity, by placing the individual in time and space, connecting him with tradition, and promising him a better afterlife. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, modern industrial societies have gone through a process

of secularization, their beliefs, practices, and religious institutions gradually losing their social and cultural significance, religion's influence being considerably weakened. Religion lost its previous cultural authority in these societies, and the religious institutions had less or no control over society. Presently, the western part of the world (the Occident) is mostly characterized by secularism, while religion plays an essential role in the social and political activities of the countries in the east and southeast of Asia (the Orient). Secular states separate their political and administrative activities from their religious ones, while fundamentalist regimes transform religion into ideology and subordinate the institutions of the state to religious institutions (Oane & Strat, 2015, p. 109).

Iran before the 1979 Revolution was a secular society. Although it was a dictatorship ruled by the Shah, there was a certain level of cultural freedom and a process of secularism inspired by Western society that characterized the country. Women were encouraged to study, and they enjoyed a high level of freedom. While proud of being Iranian, Marjane's parents are educated individuals, politically active, and obvious supporters of the Western culture and lifestyle. They read books of all kinds, have long and serious conversations on various up-to-date topics, listen to Western music and radio stations (BBC), take trips abroad, drive cars, throw parties, and have strong political opinions which they openly share with their daughter. In addition to all of this, they actively participate in the demonstrations that attempt to remove the despotic monarchy of the Shah.

However, right after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would oppose the secular way of life of Iranian society, considering it synonymous with the development of nationalism (Ferro, 2020, p. 180). As far as Khomeini was concerned, the idea of a nation was a Western concept and had as its direct consequence the fragmentation of Muslim community in a series of different nations. Consequently, the religion of Islam was supposed to take precedence over it; any other state matters was relegated to a lower position, and the idea of national belonging became less important.

Fundamentalism, the polarization of viewpoints

In the article "On defining 'fundamentalism'", Rik Peels (2022, p.15) attempts to give an all-encompassing definition of the concept. According to the author,

A movement is fundamentalist if and only if (i) it is reactionary towards modern developments, (ii) it is itself modern, and (iii) it is based on a grand historical narrative. More specifically, a movement is fundamentalist if it exemplifies a large number of the following properties: (i) it is reactionary in its rejection of liberal ethics, science, or technological exploitation, (ii) it is modern in seeking certainty and control, embracing literalism and infallibility about particular scriptures, actively using media and technology, or making universal claims, and (iii) it presents a grand historical narrative in terms of paradise, fall, and redemption, or cosmic dualism.

Many scholars believe that fundamentalism cannot be separated from modernity, being the result of the confrontations with modernist ideas (Emerson & Hartman, 2006, p. 129). As a direct consequence, fundamentalism reveals the division/separation of society in two distinct groups: the supporters and opponents of secular culture. According to this perspective, the way fundamentalism is defined and interpreted depends a lot on the chosen side. From a modern, secular viewpoint, fundamentalists are "reactionaries, radicals attempting to grab power and throw societies back into the dark ages of oppression, patriarchy, and intolerance" (Emerson & Hartman, 2006, p. 131). They might also be judged as extremists and fanatics, dogmatic and rigid in their attitude, openly expressing their hatred and desire to punish sin (Jabbour, 1994, p. 81).

For fundamentalists, however, Western modernization represents a “tidal wave of change,” meant to destroy “communities, values, social ties, and meaning” (Emerson & Hartman, 2006, p. 131).

Quoting Almond et al.’s findings (*Strong religion: the rise of fundamentalisms around the world*, 2002, the second chapter “Fundamentalism: Genus and Species”), Emerson & Hartman (2006, p. 134) register nine characteristics of fundamentalist groups, five ideological and four organizational. The former ones include: *reactivity to the marginalization of religion* (religious tradition needs to be defended against various attempts of modernization and secularization), *selectivity* (only certain aspects that clearly distinguish the fundamentalists from the mainstream are selected), *dualistic worldview* (the dichotomy between good and evil, light and darkness, righteousness and unrighteousness is emphasized), *absolutism and inerrancy*, as well as *millennialism and messianism* (at the end of time, the believers will be rewarded). The organizational criteria include *election*, *chosen membership*, *sharp boundaries*, *authoritarian organization* and *behavioral requirements*.

From political ideology to religious ideology

What started as an anti-monarchist revolution in *Persepolis*, however, ended up with the institution of a highly repressive regime that justified itself through a return to the values and teachings of the Koran. The result was a theocracy which was synonymous with a totalitarian dictatorship in which power belonged to the representatives of the religious cult. Political ideology was replaced by religious ideology and the population was subjected to a regime of harsh constraints and continuous surveillance (Oane & Strat, 2015, p. 73). The Islamic Republic was supposed to mirror the model of the Islamic community and the precepts promulgated by the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. Thus, the entire educational system was reformed, schools were closed for a certain period while curricula were rewritten, and new rules of behavior were instated. Bilingual schools that followed Western traditions were prohibited (*The Veil*) and a new, strict dress code (*The Veil*, *The Dowry*, *The Convocation*) was required. The regulations that students were supposed to obey, and the punishments inflicted on those that disregarded them were imposed by Islamic commissions that functioned in each school. In addition to this, the admission to university was conditioned by the passing of a very difficult ideological test (*The Exam*, *The Convocation*).

Non-Islamic influences were purged from the army by arresting or executing the generals after the failed coup d’etat (*The F-14s*). During the war with Iraq, the Iranian army, instead of using modern military equipment, enlisted poor young people who were promised eternal life in Paradise where they could enjoy food, women, and houses of gold and diamonds (*The Key*): “where Iraq had quality, we had quantity. Compared to Iraq, Iran had a huge reservoir of potential soldiers. The number of war martyrs emphasized that difference” (Satrapi, 2003, p. 98). Boys over the age of 13 were not allowed to leave the country as they were considered future soldiers (*The Dowry*) and were attracted with the “key to Paradise” and the honor of being celebrated as martyrs. The government’s promises of martyrdom were inspirational but false like the gold-plated plastic keys boys received at school. The cult of martyrs is exploited by Iran’s leadership to recruit fanatical youth as cannon fodder (*The Key*) and is part of war propaganda. Large advertising posters with texts such as: “Being a martyr means injecting blood into the veins of society,” (*The Key*) “The martyr is the heart of history,” “I hope to be a martyr myself,” or “A martyr lives forever.” (*The Return*) are created to manipulate the population so as not to shy away from the war effort instead of supporting it. In addition to this, honoring martyrs by naming streets after them or byself-flagellation ceremonies in schools or public spaces is a way to console and give a reason for pride to

families who have suffered human losses. “The key to Paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks” (Satrapi, 2003, p. 106).

Implementing control of the population

As for the media, it is subjected to the regime, which uses radio and television to present the official version of events and deliver the regime’s ideas to the public. Marjane learns from her father to compare the official data with the ones she hears on the BBC and thus forms an objective opinion (*The Cigarette*).

The Islamic Revolution also led to fundamental changes in the role of the police. Thus, from a public institution intended to protect the citizen by respecting his freedoms and fundamental rights, to provide assistance to the population, to fight crime and maintain public order and peace, it becomes the main instrument through which the order desired by Islamic fundamentalists is imposed. Public and private behavior is governed by Sharia law, the legal system derived from the Koran, a kind of code of life that regulates every aspect of a Muslim’s life in accordance with the wishes of the Prophet Muhammad.

The changes in public life that Marjane highlights in *Persepolis* are related to the changing code of social behavior. For example, women were required by law to be veiled and not show their hair, men and women’s clothing had to be long enough not to show their skin. Alcohol was forbidden (*The Wine*), smoking was not allowed in public space, the expression even of small gestures of affection in public space was prohibited (*The Exam*). Those who did not follow the rules were fined, beaten by the religious police, arrested, and tortured in prison (*The Socks*).

Even the urban landscape changed as Marjane notices after being away from the country for several years. The streets are adorned with huge posters with slogans praising the martyrs, and the neighborhood has numerous streets named after martyrs that recall the struggle for the Islamic Republic. The regime’s propaganda is omnipresent.

In *Persepolis*, the control of the population’s private behavior actually involves the pursuit of acts considered forbidden (parties, alcohol) as well as of those who are guilty of them. Marjane and her colleagues with more progressive views find a way to express themselves freely in private and channel their anger at the regime into loud parties night after night. Young people find the situations funny, not suspecting the danger. However, the religious police not only use tools (binoculars, rifles) and methods (intimidation, physical and verbal threats, violence) that are meant to exercise control over the population, but also show great zeal in catching and punishing participants at parties. This zeal to exercise the power of coercion without regard for the potential death of any youth is intended to inculcate fear, and thus to discourage private entertainment.

Persepolis also explores the impact of the constraints of the Islamic regime on the religious feelings and practices of the population, along with cases of blind zeal and fanaticism. School is the best place in which the intrusion of the regime’s cultural and propaganda apparatus can be observed. The institution is no longer a means of education and socialization, but a tool to achieve political and ideological goals. The teaching staff is made up of female teachers who firmly adhere to the ideology of the regime; at the same time there are cases of religious fervor that show the result of well-directed propaganda. The teachers are the ones who make Marjane and her classmates line up and beat their chests to mourn the war dead, knit bonnets for fighters or decorate the

hall to celebrate the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, fully convinced of the importance of such things (*The Key*). The female students are the best candidates to be taught obedience and a sense of duty towards the new Islamic regime. The teaching staff struggles to forcefully impose a religious moral code that does not admit any room for personal freedom or for the behavior and thinking specific to children.

The ritual of beating the hand on the chest, like that of self-flagellation in religious processions, as well as the other actions imposed as demonstrations of patriotism are perceived as ridiculous by schoolgirls who have not lost their critical sense. Their parents also agree with their children and support their beliefs by confronting the school management. Nevertheless, the response of the school to the complaints of the parents is not built on logical arguments and common sense, but on the new conception of the world imposed by Islamic law (*The Key*). Fanaticism is also illustrated by the children who during the Iran-Iraq war are willing to join the army and go to battle. Their willingness to sacrifice their lives is the result of a radicalization process instated by the regime without too much effort given that these children are extremely impressionable and easily indoctrinated into believing in the heavenly benefits of martyrdom and at the same time in the authority of the Islamic regime.

As *Persepolis* clearly demonstrates, Islamic fundamentalism is not a simple religious movement; it is a “way of life that tends to regulate the individual’s behavior and govern his relationships with God, his neighbors, his community, and the world at large” (Rabie, 2021, p. 2). As Sayyid Qutb states (as cited in Jabbour, 1994, p. 82), “Islam is *dânwawadawla* (doctrine, life, and politics) and it includes all the various aspects of the life of the individual and of the nation. Economics, politics, theology as well as the judiciary system, are part of an all-inclusive and comprehensive Islamic system.”

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to define totalitarianism as a political regime in which the state is all-powerful, having the role to impose absolute and strict discipline to its citizens. It has also tried to identify the main features of totalitarian regimes, to classify them, to register their causes and consequences, and to analyse two examples of far-right totalitarian regimes such as that established by Adolf Hitler in Germany and Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, as reflected in Art Spiegelman’s graphic narrative *Maus*, and Marjane Satrapi’s autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis*.

Art Spiegelman’s novel does not insist on the causes that led to the establishment of the Nazi regime in Germany (the economic crisis of 1929-1933, dissatisfaction with the political elites, frustrations with marginalization in international relations), though it describes the Jews’ way of life before World War II to highlight its degree of degradation towards its end.

Instead, the novel captures all the features of the totalitarian regime, and these are either explained to the reader at length and with a high degree of historical accuracy, or simply outlined or presented fragmentarily. Vladek’s story weaves into the narrative fabric essential information about the growing influence and power of the single party led by one person (the Nazi Party), the system of ideas considered absolute truths and symbols associated with these ideas (Nazi ideology, imagery), the control of the economy by the state and the politicization of all activities. The system of physical and psychological terror instituted by the Nazi regime is exemplified by an impressive series of acts of intimidation and humiliation of individuals, of verbal and physical discrimination,

of gratuitous or extreme violence that gradually led to the loss of all civil and fundamental rights and, finally, to the total extermination of the Jews.

Persepolis also faithfully portrays all the characteristics of a religious totalitarian regime. Thus, in Iran, the single political party led by a single person corresponds to the clergy led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the ideology with the value of absolute truth is represented by the Islamic teaching in the Shiite variant, media censorship is carried out by clerics, the system of physical and psychological terror that aims to coerce and monitor the population is imposed by the Revolutionary Guards, and the organization and leadership, as well as the strategy of the army in the war with Iraq, are subordinated to the clergy's religious ideology.

These two books cannot be read and analyzed without considering the problem of totalitarianism and the impact that such regimes have not only on individual destinies, but also on the fate of a country, a certain area or even the entire world. The reiteration of such events (as the ones experienced by Vladek or Marji and their families) help readers understand how tricky history can be and how easily manipulated people's minds can become. With the help of virtuous statements, propaganda perverts thoughts and beliefs, preventing people from distinguishing between what is said and what is done, what is true and what is false. This is how lies, misconception, and murderous actions can be justified by virtues or allegedly good intentions that seem to fuel and support such questionable deeds.

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