Introduction

Democracy was a dream from which Venezuelans awoke one midnight in February 1992. A coup d'état announced the commencement of the revolt of ressentiment. We did not listen to the warning and by February 1999 we saw the Leviathan rise, the Beast of State Power, seeming to come from the depths of a collective psyche or from a distant past.

The revolt of ressentiment had succeeded once more; through it, the slaves became the enslavers.

And again one has to make an attempt at understanding. To deal with it; to survive; to avoid the contagious effect of incubated hate erupting into total destruction.

There is my motive, from the middle of the hurricane – to undertake a moral quest through individual emotions that affect collectivities that affect the world.

The Venezuelan experience is but one among many instances in the contemporary world of the 21st century showing similar signs of emotions having the upper hand in social and political affairs. Genocides, terrorism, despot massacring their people, are signs that democracy, with its rational process of growing inclusion and respect for human rights, is far from the envisioned global goal of mutual understanding and deliberation.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who dealt with ressentiment and on whose work all subsequent authors on the subject have elaborated, understood his moment, the end of the 19th century, as another victory of the revolt of ressentiment started 2000 years previously with the Judeo-Christian civilization. Should we say that it is happening again at the 21st century in a sort of eternal recurrence?

Ressentiment is a complex mix of several emotions that are repressed and can be passive, lying dormant over a long time, without outward expression, incubating inside people without altering other people’s lives. But then, one day, as if out of the blue, it will emerge, revealing the corrosion of the human soul, spreading to society, eroding institutions, distorting social relationships, inverting all values. A negative violent expression that finds an echo in others – who may be attracted or repelled but are equally led by a faction of resentful avengers. According to those writing
on this phenomenon, it is a contagious and incurable psychological disease that moves entire collectivities.

My purpose will be to design a model of such emotional process in politics and apply it to the phenomena of revolution and terrorism in the contemporary world. We will depart in this journey from an old philosophical problem set by the British philosopher, David Hume, which keeps receiving polar, albeit inconclusive, answers: ‘Is reason the slave of passions’. Because if that is so, then we are helpless in face of the ‘... rough beast, its hour come round at last...’ (Yeats 1919); immersed in a recurring tide; again at the stage Nietzsche warned about at the end of 19th century: historical ressentiment, a nihilist revolt and the decay of civilization.

We will address Hume’s question and avoid his dilemma by adding a time modifier to his proposition: sometimes it is so; but some other times, reason gets to control destructive emotions for the common good. What is justice, education, ethical understandings, but the persistent intent of reason to control individual passions within, and in relation to, society?

We place the problem of passions affecting social life within the scope of willful human action. As we work through several authors thus paving our way to understanding ressentiment, and draw a model of the individual psychological process to its collective expression through revolt and destruction, we find the human face of the beast: leadership becomes the core of its agency. There is general agreement among authors that there is a need of a faction of resentful leaders, and followers to their call, to mobilize a revolt of ressentiment.

In the following chapters we will show that ressentiment is a political passion; that it has to do with power relationships and conditions of impotence. By identifying the conditions of the appearance of the disease, its incubation and outbursts in violence, murder and suicide, we will proceed to apply it to the analysis of revolution and terrorist phenomena, including, as a special case study, the Venezuelan experience.

Throughout the book, we will ponder on the incurability and long span of the development of the disease, disagreeing with Nietzsche on the time issue for both logical and historical reasons. The vessels of emotions are individuals, and psychological diseases cannot be attributed to societies but to individuals. Terrorism and the Venezuelan experience show also that the grudge held by the resentful relates to their life experience.

Although much work has yet to come from the behavioral sciences on ressentiment, to determine if it is incurable, consideration must turn on its collective and historical effects, to ponder on the possibilities of avoiding them, both by a progressive recognition of the conditions that breed ressentiment and the grudges held by whole collectivities, and by working towards ethical leadership that is able to create and sustain agreements
over values. What we learn through this journey is that ressentiment is a struggle over opposite values, when good is replaced by what was considered bad. The uncertainty produced by the inversion of values cannot be overcome except through agreement about ethical values. It is agreement that allows for redemption from human grievances and requires recognition of our human, too human, weaknesses and potentialities.

After a revolt of ressentiment, when preventive medicine is no good and the revolt acts as a centrifuge recreating hate, even up to a global level, we need to discuss how we can redeem ourselves from the guilt and the shame of belonging to a time when we had all the answers to a good life but were unable to live up to them.