

A Country with a Wounded Soul: Memory as a Form of Public Value

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*Without memory, we do not know who we are.
Without memory, we wander in bewilderment,
not knowing where to go.
Without memory, there is no identity.
(...) Memory helps us recover our own identity
and recognize the truth,
without which there will be neither reconciliation nor encounter.*
Augusto Gongora

I.

Thinking about the future of Venezuela, where, as Cruz-Diez said, “everything has to be invented”¹, implies political and technical discussions to make and become once again a productive country, stable, one that overcomes violence, hunger, and barbarism. It is then an exercise of hopeful projection, aimed at generating public value understood as those needs satisfied by the State, which with a marked quality

1 “La Carta que Carlos Cruz-Diez le escribió a la juventud de venezolana.” *Prodavinci*, July 28, 2019. Retrieved March 19, 2023. <https://prodavinci.com/lea-la-carta-que-carlos-cruz-diez-le-escribio-a-la-juventud-venezolana/>

and timeliness, is capable of building resilient and sustainable societies.²

In that sense, thinking about the Venezuelan democratic transition naturally involves starting to build what we want to become, but it also entails considering the country we are and the one we aspire to stop being. It is about co-constructing that future with a historical sense and a culture of memory; such an exercise is not preconditioned by reaching a post-conflict state; rather, remembering amid conflict allows for its denaturalization.

II.

According to Rodolfo Montes de Oca, “Remembering in moments of danger is not mere coincidence or nostalgic refuge (...) Speaking about the remnants of freedom that underlie every society oppressed by authoritarianism is to speak of resistance, and this often escapes the desired images. In the suffocating everyday life, anonymous heroisms are forged, those who only did what they had to, but that help prevent the worst tyrannies from exterminating the soul of the peoples.”³. In this way, Montes de Oca introduces his book *“The Usual*

2 Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), *Valor Público y gestión por resultados* (Santiago: CEPAL, March 30, 2022). Retrieved March 30, 2023, https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/courses/files/valor_publico_y_gestion_por_resultados.pdf

3 Rodolfo Montes de Oca, *Sospechosos habituales: Diez aproximaciones a los antecedentes históricos del movimiento de los derechos humanos en Venezuela (1936-1999)* (Venezuela: PROVEA, 2022). Own translation.

Suspects” as a study on human rights violations as a historical problem in Venezuela that extends and intensifies into our present.

These include *El Carupanazo* (1962), *El Porteñazo* (1962), the massacre of *El Amparo* (1988), *El Caracazo* (1989), the murders of dissident guerrilla groups during the armed insurgency; these are the theaters of operations, the abuses of guarantees and human rights. Based on this, the Justice and Truth Commission in 2017 concluded that between 1961 and 1989, there were 10,071 victims, of which 1,412 were murdered and 459 people suffered forced disappearance.

While this Commission –created during the Chavista-Madurista government– identified the names and roles of those responsible, none faced judicial proceedings for their direct responsibility in the repressive acts⁴. Although active factors in the armed insurgency of the time, such as the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (PCV) and the *Movimiento De Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR), were pacified, a genuine process of memory, truth, and justice was not fostered. As a result, the victims of that era were left without any kind of moral or legal reparation, leaving an open wound.

Therefore, Hugo Chávez’s rise in 1998 was based on a concert of resentments, which aligned with institutional crisis and a system that lost its agency, thus gaining a majority for the emergence of a radical system that has generated a complex humanitarian emergency, the perpetuation of human rights

4 Rodolfo Montes de Oca, *Sospechosos habituales...*

violations, and a migratory crisis that has made Venezuela a country of emigration, with a diaspora of 7.7 million migrants and displaced people at the time of writing this article.⁵

During the Chavista government, we have experienced the Oil Strike (2002), the mobilization on April 11, 2002, the radicalization towards 21st-century Socialism (2005), the closure of RCTV (2007), the repression of student and citizen protests in 2014, and the Popular Rebellion of 2017. In this system, Venezuelan society has been reduced by the loss of Juan Pablo Pernalet, to name just one of the 163 people killed by official repression forces in the context of political protests during 2017, who died from the impact of a tear gas canister directly to his heart.⁶

According to the report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, “The SEBIN has tortured or inflicted ill-treatment on detainees—including opposition politicians, journalists, protesters, and human rights defenders— mainly at «*El Helicoide*» a detention center in Caracas.” The mission has investigated 51 cases that occurred since 2014. The report details how the highest-level

5 UN Refugee Agency, Llamamiento de emergencia: Situación sobre Venezuela. September, 2023. Retrieved March 19, 2024. <https://www.acnur.org/emergencias/situacion-de-venezuela>.

6 Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, “Venezuela: 6.729 protestas y 163 fallecidos desde el 1 de abril de 2017,” August 02, 2017. Retrieved March 19, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/sin-categoria/venezuela-6-729-protestas-y-157-fallecidos-desde-el-1-de-abril-de-2017>

authorities gave orders to lower-ranking officials. The mission has detailed that there are responsibilities in the commission of crimes against humanity that are currently being investigated by the International Criminal Court.⁷

III.

In Venezuela, there is little culture of memory, and given what we have experienced, we must build a public memory policy that leads to a process of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The act of historical memory carries particular challenges; initially, it is a painful action and, therefore must be done collectively. Moreover, it helps build identity: trying to remember is about seeing ourselves as a society to understand what we were, to reclaim ourselves, as a mechanism of reparation and justice.

Thus, memory has public value, potentially allowing for the creation of resilient and sustainable societies. However, this type of policy requires a very complex and broad consensus to ensure it is of high quality and timely. It demands avoiding biases, making it a naturally long process that requires the participation of a diverse range of actors.

In Venezuela, another major challenge is the dismantled public system. The fact that political parties have had their

7 Naciones Unidas, "Venezuela: Nuevo informe de la ONU detalla las responsabilidades por crímenes de lesa humanidad para reprimir a la disidencia y pone la lupa en la situación en las zonas mineras remotas," September 20, 2022. Retrieved March 19, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/es/press-releases/2022/09/venezuela-new-un-report-details-responsibilities-crimes-against-humanity>

functions significantly reduced due to persecution by the dictatorship is an evidence of this dismantling. These limitations began with the elimination of public funding for these institutions, which reduced their operational capacity and forced them to take on spaces naturally belonging to other civil society actors. At the same time, third-sector organizations also suffer from operating in an increasingly restricted civic space where legal and political constraints are imposed by the system, including stigmatization, persecution, imprisonment, and torture of the members and functions of organized society.

The remaining public actors who dissent from the system, such as unions, professional associations, religious groups, human rights defenders, and pressure groups in general, live under constant harassment. Therefore, in a democratic transition process, Venezuela will face a very fragmented social fabric, making it essential to create spaces to build trust and regenerate it.

IV.

Given the need to start building historical memory, at the Venezuelan Youth Observatory (OBJUVE), we have been working on Listening and Speaking Spaces to document and record what we have gone through as a country in recent years. Through various activities inspired by humor that encourage collective reflection, we aim to create a memory device through physical senses. For this, participants are asked to choose a memory contextualized within the current Venezuelan crisis and identify where it physically hurts.

In one of these workshops, the father of a young political prisoner said, “*Having your child imprisoned hurts your soul.*” This statement can be taken to the public sphere: We are a country with a wounded soul, and we have the arduous task of ensuring that pain and resentment never again drive the management of political and public power.