Airport Historiography? Notes on the Craft of Historians in the Decade 2013-2023[1]

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Examining Venezuelan historiography over the past decade requires considering two inevitable processes inherent to any analysis of the current situation in Venezuela: the digital revolution, which the world embarked upon at the turn of the century, and the humanitarian crisis that has gripped the

1 These notes are not absolute nor do they pretend to be; they represent a brief overview, the author's personal vision, and are based on various sources, including interviews conducted with several representatives of Venezuelan historiography in the 21st century, which have been published in different media outlets such as *El Estímulo, Prodavinci, Cinco8* y *La Gran Aldea*. Some of these interviews were compiled in *Miradas reversas. 15 historiadores cuentan su historia*, Alfa, 2021. Among these notes, one very important aspect is missing: the systematic compilation of contributions from colleagues who, for various reasons, have emigrated. On these efforts, which are currently scattered, we hope to write in the future, when we have more time... and space.

country since 2014. While the former revolutionized communication formats globally, shifting from paper to screen, the latter compelled Venezuela to undergo a similar transformation due to the crisis and censorship plaguing traditional media outlets: radio, print, and television. The confluence of these two processes has had far-reaching effects on all aspects of Venezuelan society, fundamentally altering conventional modes of interaction. The field of historians has not been exempt from this transformation, as the profession has been evolving since the last decades of the 20th century.

The advent of the 21st Century

At the onset of the current century, historian José Ángel Rodríguez convened 40 historians for a compilation aimed at diagnosing Venezuelan historiography. The striking heterogeneity of the group was evident not only in terms of age, gender, or political leanings —comprising both men and women, young and seasoned individuals with distinct perspectives— but also in their diverse lines of research, approaches, and methods of delving into the past. These ranged from traditional political studies to exploring *new* sources such as visual arts, music, cinema, and photography sources. The term "new" is emphasized here because nearly half a century has passed since their emergence, and these formats are now integral parts of our society.

Conducting a similar expedition —which José Ángel Rodríguez successfully achieved— at present seems challenging. The once-unified community has fragmented, with many participants still active in the field yet impaired by the political

polarization that emerged later on despite their shared presence in academic spaces such as universities, archives, and libraries. The commemoration of the bicentennial of independence is proof of this: while from the private sector and some corporations, such as the Fundación Polar, the editorial Alfa, the National Academy of History and its regional academies, critical studies were printed and books were reissued, from the public sector material was also produced that, beyond partisan and ideological purposes, invited the questioning of traditional historiography and the promotion of *insurgency*. In both cases, there was a drive to disrupt the *statu quo*.

By the end of the first decade, right at the bicentennial year of independence in 2011, historian Ángel Almarza had already identified the emergence of a new official history. In his chapter "Two centuries of poorly narrated stories," from the book *El Relato Invariable. Independencia, Mito y Nación*, edited by Inés Quintero, Almarza dissects the themes and forms of an insurgent historiography promoted by the National Center of History. This organization, established by Hugo Chávez in 2007 and as stated on their website, aimed to oversee Venezuelan state policy regarding knowledge, research, protection, and dissemination of national history and collective memory. This move was likely in response to criticisms from the National Academy of History, composed of opposition figures, and a recognition of the pervasive influence of political polarization on historical investigations.

The reinterpretation of the past not only involved the rewriting of history books, academic research, and educational curricula in primary and secondary schools —leading to the

creation of the Bicentennial Collection, a series of books that effectively supplanted the publishing market for school textbooks in public schools— but also extended to national commemorations and anniversaries. Statues were erected while others were toppled, and the names of highways, parks, squares, and numerous public spaces were changed under state auspices, which since 1999 have also borne the "Bolivarian" moniker. Moreover, alongside this *insurgence* against the traditional homeland historiography, perceived as inheriting the legacy of nineteenth-century elites, emerged the construction of a new pantheon of heroes, *more inclusive* despite the continued centrality of Simón Bolívar, a white Creole from one of the main families of the eighteenth century.

Beyond these endeavors —many echoing the longstanding stance of the National Academy of History— Venezuelan historiography as a whole has remained dynamic. This was the conclusion drawn by historian Tomás Straka in a historiographical assessment covering the profession's state over the 25 years spanning from 1988 to 2013. Straka emphasized the proliferation of scholarly studies and the establishment of historical research centers that gained prominence towards the end of the twentieth century. Historians now hold postgraduate degrees from various universities and even top the lists of bestselling books in the country. Luis Prados and Maye Primera aptly titled a piece in *El País*, quoting Inés Quintero: "History as self-help." Fueled by nostalgia and a quest to understand the present, Venezuelans have grown interested in reading books on distant and recent history.

According to Straka, these new publications and scholarly contributions delineate emerging trends in twenty-first-century historiography, aspiring to be more empirical and less theoretical. The new generation of historians gravitates towards "studies of concrete problems" as a prevailing trend, yielding noteworthy results in many cases. Fewer scholars seek to evade the meticulous archival work by relying solely on sociological or economic theories, as Straka termed it: the demise of the concealing historian and the resurgence of methodological specificity. The resurgence of political and intellectual history, the reconfiguration of regional history, geohistory as an indispensable discipline, and the advancement of new social and cultural history are among the trends highlighted in Straka's assessment of the preceding quarter-century. These trends underscore the vitality of a historiography poised to confront the next decade's challenges.

Thus, by the first decade of the 21st century, we encounter a professional and mature historiography that, far from merely summarizing, describing, and echoing the old paradigms of the past, engages in historical problematization through internal critique and external analysis. The foundation of this historiographical development lies in the School of History at the Central University of Venezuela, under the leadership of Germán Carrera Damas. Unlike the historical narratives of the 19th century, which idealized events or figures in alignment with the State, or the historiography of the first half of the 20th century, which often served to legitimize existing power structures, Venezuelan historiography of the 21st century represents the culmination of theoretical and methodological

endeavors that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, following the ousting of the government of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez. As historian Elías Pino Iturrieta has aptly noted, this development is not coincidental.

Airport historiography and new formats

The decade from 2013 to 2023 presents a multifaceted landscape for various reasons. As mentioned earlier, the advent of the digital age was so profound that no country could remain untouched: by 2010, the rise of social media and new online platforms had become a global reality. In Venezuela, this phenomenon was not only fueled by globalization and its pervasive influence but also by the decline in oil prices and the statist economic policies implemented by Hugo Chávez's government, culminating in a humanitarian crisis affecting society and endangering traditional media outlets. The collapse of the publishing market, triggered by the economic downturn, led to a decline in historiographical production due to university dropouts and emigration.

In this context, Venezuela transitioned into the digital era not by choice but out of necessity. This transition, as observed in historiography and many other fields, involved a shift in platforms: the few historians who remained and retained an interest in continuing their profession no longer solely focused on writing books or articles for peer-reviewed journals, or at least not with the same frequency and enthusiasm as before. Instead, they began publishing within the emerging digital media ecosystem that arose in response to the challenges posed by the crisis. Whereas publishing historiographical studies in

books was once a challenging endeavor, the devaluation of the bolivar and the crisis within publishing houses meant that publications now depended on author recognition and the topic's marketability. Consequently, reprints of works by renowned historians became prevalent, and biographies and studies on specific events and periods proliferated.

Today, historical narratives are also crafted for the general public-individuals interested in the past given their current experiences but who are not experts in the field, although they seek to maintain rigor and critical analysis, as highlighted by Inés Quintero in her radio program *No es Cuento, es Historia*: "For a historian to condense content into such a concise format requires an extraordinary effort, but the radio format demands it." However, this trend is not intended to replace the depth of other scholarly research; rather, it represents an adaptation for non-specialist readers. Tomás Straka echoes this sentiment: "Not all work should cater to a general audience; there are academic studies, specialized journals, and highly specific topics. Therefore, pursuing historical knowledge must be a collaborative effort, where there is a dialogue between those who lay the groundwork and those who eloquently convey the findings that captivate the audience"[2].

It is a lucid narrative, diverging from academic technicality and the cloistered environment, which finds a niche in digital media with attention-grabbing titles. Historian Germán Carrera Damas referred to these dissemination studies as "airport historiography," likening them to the engaging content often

2 Own translations.

found in magazines and books within airport lounges. In an interview discussing the National Academy of History and the social responsibility of historians, he remarked, "I have ceased to attend for several reasons, among them the shift towards what I like to call '*airport historiography*' and similar endeavors that are not for me."[3] This responsibility fosters historical consciousness, which, in our view, hinges on public interest.

Digital platforms such as *Prodavinci*, *Cinco8*, and *La Gran Aldea* currently serve as venues where historians like Inés Quintero, Tomás Straka, Elías Pino Iturrieta, Rafael Arráiz Lucca, and Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, among others, remain active in the profession, each with their distinct research focus and manners of communication. They are not merely subjects of interviews regarding specific topics or projects; they also serve as frequent contributors and columnists. For instance, Pino Iturrieta's Sunday column in *La Gran Aldea* delves into historical subjects intertwined with contemporary citizen issues. These are not mere commentaries on current events but rather reflections grounded in historical episodes or parallels with the past, written by a historian who will soon enter his eighth decade of life, more than half of which has been devoted to professional historiography.

However, despite their constraints -usually in length- digital articles are not the sole tools historians utilize. Pino Iturrieta has ventured into audiovisual media with *Manual de Malas Maneras*, a podcast he produces with journalist Adriana Núñez Rabascall, offering historical perspectives on current

3 Own translation.

issues. Similarly, Rafael Arráiz Lucca, along with Henrique Lazo, hosts *Eso es un Tema*, a live radio show with substantial audience figures, featuring different guests each day. However, Arráiz Lucca's most notable endeavor is *Venezolanos*, a podcast he records for Unión Radio, chronicling key events, processes, and figures in Venezuelan history. He mentions that the episodes have been listened to 400,000 times, an unprecedented pedagogical reach for a free production, unlike a paid book.

Inés Quintero embarked on a similar project in the past with Banesco's support. Her micro-series *No es Cuento, es Historia* was compiled into two books published by Dahbar and later adapted for publication on Instagram. The trajectories of these two historians illustrate the profession's evolution, which no longer necessitates the composition of lengthy treatises spanning hundreds of pages to fulfill its purpose; rather, it can achieve this aim in a didactic and accessible manner through media resources. This adaptation to the present not only allows for greater reach and dissemination of research, but also makes a profession, often disregarded for not being economically profitable, more viable, as evidenced by support for film and theater productions like Héctor Manrique's *Mi Último Delirio*.

The new generation

These formats and platforms have cultivated an important yield: the interest of a new generation in knowing and studying the history of Venezuela. Many are university undergraduates, while others are pursuing postgraduate and extension courses. By 2013-2023, the generation José Ángel Rodríguez brought together in *Visiones del Oficio* is consolidated. Although still

fragmented, new scholars of the past, affected by the humanitarian emergency, are paving the way in various discussion spaces. The Rafael María Baralt History Prize attests to this: sponsored by the National Academy of History and the Bancaribe Foundation for Science and Culture, its objective is to promote and stimulate historical research conducted by recently graduated young historians aspiring to establish a career and reputation in historiography.

Since its inception in 2008, when the first call was announced, until 2023, 15 promising historians have been recognized with the Baralt Prize, several of whom are now established figures in national and regional historiographies of the Americas: Gustavo Adolfo Vaamonde, Rodolfo Enrique Ramírez-Ovalles, Ángel Almarza, José Alberto Olivar, Sócrates Ramírez, Lorena Puerta Bautista, Luis Daniel Perrone, Gustavo Enrique Salcedo, Alejandro Cáceres, Eloísa Ocando Thomas, Francisco Soto Oraa, Esther Mobilia Diotaiuti, Jesús Piñero, Andrés Eloy Burgos, and Betnaly González Yañez. The impact of this award is already evident: these scholars are either forging their careers beyond Venezuelan borders in prestigious institutes and universities, or they remain in the country, receiving accolades and distinctions, becoming reference points in their respective research areas, and occupying significant positions in academia.

For an issue of *Cuadernos UCAB*, the postgraduate magazine of the Andrés Bello Catholic University, published at the end of the first quarter of 2023, Tomás Straka, the edition's coordinator, sought to highlight the role of young people in the study of history. Drawing on his experience with a series of

books aimed at introducing new authors from the influential workshops of the Rómulo Gallegos Center for Latin American Studies (Celarg) in the 1990s, Straka demonstrated that the new generations' interest is not unique to our times but has been a constant concern within the realm of intellectual production. Titled *Nuevas Voces*, the issue includes six works by young historians undergoing training in the Doctorate in History at that institution, who converge on common themes despite employing different approaches and methodologies.

This analysis draws the following conclusion: "(...) all the texts focus on contemporary history, especially the Cold War; and, significantly, contrary to the usual parochialism of our historical studies, they adopt a global perspective. Perhaps because they are products of globalization, because they are digital natives, and because of their ability to communicate in multiple languages (at least in most cases), their boundaries are not restricted by the contents of Venezuelan archives or the Spanish language. They know how to navigate online document repositories, have contacts in various locations —a byproduct of migration— and are not intimidated by foreign languages. They have achieved this more or less independently, as neither contemporaneity nor global history characterizes the interests of most of their educators (...)"[4], interests that align with those of other young people worldwide.

The Cold War emerges as a central theme within the context of the 20th century, one of the primary subjects of study for young historians. The fervent interest in understanding the

4 Own translation.

colonial period, independence, and even the 19th century that prevailed in the 1990s and during the republican bicentennial seems to have waned. For this generation, the past century, viewed as the backdrop to their turbulent present, has become the primary focus of the papers they submit in their graduate programs and even for the doctoral theses they aim to present in the future. The examination of this period, while not new to historiography, now begins with a review and comprehension of other aspects from a temporal distance rather than through the presence of eyewitnesses: it is not just the major events that interest this generation, but also the personalities.

This shift can be interpreted as an attempt to find references for the present, detached from the controversies that entangled older historians who, being born and raised in the 20th century, were direct witnesses to its key political events. A case in point is the ongoing passionate debate surrounding October 18, 1945: nearly a century later, it still evokes conflicting interpretations due to its historical consequences and the differing accounts of its protagonists. Thus, the approaches taken by young historians towards this period not only represent a fresh interpretation of events from a global perspective but also, perhaps more significantly, a departure from the passionate biases that have characterized earlier historiography, thanks to the temporal distance from its primary narrators.

However, the outlook is not entirely optimistic. Amid the digital age and the exacerbated humanitarian crisis, new historians, like other professionals - especially journalists - must confront new challenges. Despite having access to numerous

repositories, libraries, online archives, and platforms for disseminating their findings and conclusions, the internet poses a challenge: ensuring accuracy *vis-a-vis* the proliferation of fake news. These falsehoods not only affect contemporary news or recent history but also distort historical facts themselves. In late 2022, for example, a headline in *Semana* magazine claimed to have discovered the death certificate of the Liberator, Simon Bolivar, although, in reality, this document had been public for years. It underscores the challenge of verifying information amidst the deluge of misinformation.

Closing remarks

In conclusion, these new ways of creating and disseminating history have elicited reactions in a country subjected to the rule of a single party for a quarter of a century. However, this monolithic narrative has failed to sway society, which instead has shown resistance to the alteration of its historical narrative, demonstrating an interest in uncovering its origins and tracing the trajectory of historiography. This resilience persists despite the distortions propagated by official propaganda and even on social media, where misinformation proliferates. Although these platforms have served as avenues for open discussion, they have also become breeding grounds for fake news, bots, and trolls that glorify authoritarian leaders of the past, such as Juan Vicente Gómez or Marcos Pérez Jiménez, thus stifling the criticism and debate essential for the study of history, where there is no room for dogmatic assertions or condemnations; rather, it is a space for nuanced understanding within its context: temporal, spatial, and *man*.