

Democratización



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The founder of *Dale Letra* and promoter of the Civic Forum points out that Venezuelans “are obliged to reunite”, and argues that society must “humanize the conflict so that we can understand the keys that will lead us into the future”.

In Venezuela, words have been emptied of meaning. After so much tampering and manipulation, terms such as *peace*, *dialogue* and *people* raise suspicions and generate aversion for the majority. Deep down, they all refer to the same thing, but the concepts –and interests– are diametrically opposed.

Mariela Ramírez (Caracas, 1965), an architect who graduated from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), founder of the *Dale Letra* movement, is committed to the construction of a

discourse that unites a society fractured by violence, misery and pain.

"It is imperative to start a dialogue in order to rebuild the social pact," says Ramírez, who, along with dozens of activists carrying banners with vowels and consonants, usually attends citizen protests that during these years have written the history of national conflict in the streets.

—¿Por qué decidieron llamar a su organización *Dale Letra*?

Dale Letra was born from affection, from the interaction between a group of friends, from civilians who have spent years talking about and suffering the crisis faced by our country. What inspired us was the idea of dismantling the absurd dichotomy (the polarization) in which we have been submerged, where we have been diminished and where we have confronted each other, the progressive social fragmentation, the absence of words as a thread which can spin together collective life.

Our actions are intended for citizens to recover words, language, as an instrument of critical thinking, of questioning, of social change, as a force that can create new ideas and projects that can make our country's transformation possible.

The name of our movement arises from this aspiration. "Dame letra" (literally translated as "give me a letter") is a popular expression in Venezuela, used to ask someone to explain, to express an idea or a feeling, to provide more information, using words. We reformulated that phrase to "Dale Letra" (literally translated as "give them a letter"), now as an invitation to each citizen to express themselves using words and populating spaces of coexistence, communicating and listening to the variety of thoughts and feelings of the vast diversity that makes up our

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nation as a collective, in order to, through this dynamic of social dialogue, rediscover, retrace the path towards the democratic future and well-being that we all desire.

–For years there has been a debate about the "newspeak" that is imposed by those who wield power. Could it be said that today we all speak as Chavistas or the way that Chavismo wants us to?

Language has been hijacked through media control and censorship. The purpose, in our opinion, has been to build and implement a newspeak that encloses us in a controlled space, under official cosmetics, one that seems to envelop us like a boa constrictor, stripping us of our humanity and, therefore, of our ability to dialogue and reflect.

Changing the political system becomes impossible when citizens are confined to this jargon, which is polarized and polarizing, and which appears to be implanted by the ruling party and other radical factors. This is why we believe it is urgent to aim our actions towards helping citizens regain their say, their speech.

We must, as patient craftsmen, rebuild the surface and the core of our words, withdraw any revolutionary uniformity, humanize the conflict so that we can understand the keys that will lead us into the future.

Each of us is essential because each of us is a necessary symbol, or letter, for the creation of a collective language that makes it possible to overcome the crisis through the renewal of the social pact.

–The opposition forces are much doubted for their inability to create a “narrative” different from Chavismo’s. But considering the overpowering censorship, are there actually spaces to create and disseminate an alternative story?

We are part of a fragmented social body today, plagued by hunger and disease, in the midst of great helplessness. We are obliged to reunite, even under high social risk in the context of an authoritarian project, and propose images, projects, leaderships that believe in a dream.

Making that dream a living substance –a being– that inhabits our lives requires, paraphrasing the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, to become intimate and familiar with those specters that speak to us from the depths of our history, to spell and memorize their stripped words and their stones in order to, perhaps, open the path in which history –life– fulfills its promises.

Becoming intimate, close to the other, is a task that discards violence as a way of change. That is why we must open the way for politics, fill the spaces for participation and work on the construction of that common “narrative”, a shared vision of the future, intelligently avoiding the obstacles imposed by the authoritarian project.

–What should this new story, alternative to the one imposed by those in power and which tramples, be like?

Venezuelans face great challenges in order to achieve the transformation that the country requires. We believe that the most correct answers will emerge from the interaction between the diversity of positions, views, knowledge, wisdom and experiences. By dialoguing, reflecting together, it is possible to build a

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collective intelligence, rich in plurality, capable of broadening the gaze of each one of us on the problems and challenges we face and, therefore, bring us back on track. A common narrative must be based, from our point of view, on the human being.

The dynamic of the Social Dialogue that we have proposed with social organizations has allowed us to establish links with a variety of actors through a process of plural and inclusive listening, identification of common objectives, accompaniment in solidarity and joint work in order to give more visibility to the crisis and the fight for our rights.

We believe that this dynamic, which must be cultivated at all levels, can help to gradually create the sought-after narrative with the human being and the real needs of the people at its core. That should be the starting point for this alternative story: the construction of a common project by and for the people, lowering the decibels of the political diatribe.

–Should we seek to oppose the Chavista narrative or include it in this new one? Would this be possible despite the wounds and resentments accumulated during these past years?

The conceptual and political profile of the narrative that defines and configures the reflections and actions of the organizations and social movements that promote Social Dialogue is to work for the common good, without exclusions, to influence the decision-making of public policies in favor of the people and democratize the spaces of their incidence, as well as to serve as a bridge, mediator and catalyst between the sectors in conflict, without losing sight of the characteristics of the group that holds power today in Venezuela.

It is about the reappropriation of political spaces by a civil society mobilized in the context of the complex humanitarian emergency, in order to defend the Human Rights of the people, which emerges as a consequence of the severe crisis of the State. Overcoming this crisis requires, in the first place, all Venezuelans, without exclusions, to be able to build a shared vision of the future, and that happens through dialogue and reconciliation. I would like to use the words of the American professor John Paul Lederach, peacebuilder, who expresses in his book *The Moral Imagination. The art and soul of building peace* the following question: "How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them?"

He responds with the following approach: *"Transcending violence is forged by the capacity to generate, mobilize, and build the moral imagination. The kind of imagination to which I refer is mobilized when four disciplines and capacities are held together and practiced by those who find their way to rise above violence. Stated simply, the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence"*.

We agree with him: it is necessary to rise above violence, wounds and resentments to imagine ourselves in a network of relationships that includes us all and that embraces the complexity of the Venezuelan case beyond the dualistic polarity. Thus, from there, we will be able to build the alternative that allows us to reunify society and obtain justice, reparation and the guarantee of non-repetition that allows us to move towards an inclusive Venezuela that guarantees well-being and progress for all.

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–How can you start a conversation with someone who says we are living in a democracy?

I insist we are obliged to do so. I would say more than obliged to do so, precisely because at this moment we, Venezuelans, do not have a shared understanding of reality, which is why it is imperative to start this dialogue in order to rebuild the social pact. It is precisely because we do not agree that this conversation is so necessary. It is urgent to recover words, language, and to make them circulate expressing thoughts and feelings, building, telling stories, motivating, connecting, focusing on accurate criticism and self-criticism, healing wounds. Only in this way will we be able to build the foundations of a new democracy in Venezuela.

–In today's Venezuela, should culture be thought of as a space of resistance or of integration?

I would say both. Time and again we have seen Venezuelans take to the streets in defense of the rule of law. Every day we see expressions of protest emanate, showing a tireless social movement in favor of democratization.

This is a social movement in which forms of expression and solidarity feed into our cultural heritage, include innovative protest narratives through poetry, song, theater, etc., and this, in turn, has allowed the integration of a diversity of actors who have remained together in the streets, giving testimony of their unwavering commitment to building a new democracy and a culture of peace that makes the well-being of Venezuelans possible.

The moral imagination that John Paul Lederach speaks of is stimulated by exploring the reservoir of collective memory, of the images and symbols that emanate from the interactions in this

Social Dialogue that we propose. Culture makes up the great channel to which we can turn to know and recognize ourselves.

It is important to highlight that these forms of manifestation of discontent, attached to the guidelines of Active Nonviolence and that make use of culture as an instrument of resistance and integration, using all languages and resources, is what has allowed a diverse group of actors to remain in the streets in defense of our rights.

We have been manifesting for the right to food, health, freedom of expression, education, public services, for labor rights, promoting citizen participation and organization, fighting for the restitution of our right to choose our rulers in free elections, demanding the release of political prisoners, the comprehensive defense of our territory, the cessation of the enormous ecological damage by the extraction practices that are carried out throughout the national territory, as well as working for social pedagogy to give visibility to certain issues, to denounce and document the complex humanitarian emergency that the country is going through, in the midst of a restrictive context.

–Can culture provide an answer to what is a Venezuelan today?

Culture, as I said before, is a great channel to get to know and recognize ourselves. We, Venezuelans, have a great challenge in this regard. An integrating and transforming process of the unconscious contents of the national conglomerate is necessary, to undertake a process of recognition of our diverse identities and thus a renewal of the social order without excluding any sector of the Venezuelan society.

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For this, an individual and personal dialogue is imperative, and committing to facing our-selves, in the nakedness of our reality. It is also necessary to make ourselves present, with due respect, honoring the humanity of the other in spaces of conciliation among those who think differently, in spaces of interaction and existence.

Only in that ritual that is at the same time sacrifice and offering, that of encounter at the root of our mutual humanity, will we be able to consummate the creative act to overcome the ignominy that we suffer, that our people, our territory, our country suffer.

The invitation is to open the senses and our cultural reservoir, our collective memory in order to make ourselves sensitive, to refine our sagacity to glimpse, paraphrasing Lederach, any hint of peaceful transformation that appears in the midst of the different painful expressions of violence, and humanize the conflict to be able to overcome it.

–After so many years of polarization and social tension, how to agree on some basic principles that allow us to rebuild coexistence?

The Social Dialogue that we propose is a free communicative and deliberative environment, where the various social and political actors can acknowledge each other, restore ties of trust, get used to sharing information and consulting each other horizontally and transparently.

A shared, open and public social dialogue, subject to criticism, with representation from all sectors of the country is the way, the instrument, from our perspective, to agree on those basic principles that will allow us to rebuild coexistence, our ability to understand each other, and to move forward in building a society

that respects Human Rights in which we can all aspire to well-being and progress.

Conclusion

We dedicate our twelfth issue to reflecting on five areas of culture in Venezuela: humor, education, art, anthropology and social media. As we expressed before, it has been an approximation with which we do not pretend to reach a conclusive analysis. It is the photograph of a moment that we hope will transcend, because it describes the impetus and perseverance of those who, from different spaces, contribute to the liberation of our country.

In the five articles included in this issue, we find complex diagnoses, deep reflections and responsible hope, one that is based on two pillars: first, in the full awareness of those who understand that the goal of their efforts is worthwhile in itself and, second, sustained work that does not allow itself to be defeated by the ups and downs of the conjunctures and advances firmly overcoming the immediate culture —what José Ignacio Cabrujas called the *culture of operations* and today we could update it as a *culture of missions*— which at times has conspired against Venezuelan noblest ventures.

After editing this issue, some questions arise and open up new horizons for study and reflection. When reading the authors, we wonder how this authoritarian, complex and painful episode will affect —in Ortegian terms— the *psyche* of our country; how it will influence our "original impetus"; how our humor, our affections, our traditions will be marked; how will our goodness or eternal disposition to enjoy ourselves be transformed, or not.

Exploring the depth of our wounds and the way in which they have affected our Venezuelan soul is not a mere intellectual fact.

It is an exercise that can help to understand the difficulties of the present moment and to warn of future challenges. From now on, understanding “now” as a constant present, we can acknowledge that this reality that we are living –or surviving– will condition our culture and our political dynamics.

Recently, we have noticed signs that worry us, but we will not refer to all of them. We will only stop at one in particular. We have seen that uncertainty, fatigue and terror have led us to go from an “every man for himself” situation to a “dog-eat-dog” situation. A wave of intolerance among those of us who pursue the same goals of freedom is flooding the limited deliberative space that remains and seriously limiting encounters between people who have the right to think differently. As is characteristic of the 21st century, this trend is mainly manifested in social media, especially on Twitter, where we see forceful and irrevocable judgments of 280 characters and responses loaded with contempt for the opinion of others. Paradoxically, we also frequently see that those who subscribe to this dynamic then demand that political actors and society be willing to dialogue and conciliate. It is a contradiction that we are called to overcome.

We think –and propose– that a possible antidote to cure this tendency is personal encounter. Discovering the other, banishing stereotypes, transcending digital means, boasting good intentions, saying things by looking at each other, preparing arguments to better explain oneself, working to convince... it is an arduous and exhausting task. We believe that at this time it is necessary to rebuild the human bridges that have been blown up by the dictatorship's violence. And to do so, mere will is not enough, and can actually be reduced to dangerous voluntarism if divorced from the reality of things. It is a difficult task that requires political pedagogy and personal virtue. Perhaps going

back to what our democracy was can help us find our own paths. We are not orphans, and recognizing where we come from can shed some light on the future ahead of us.

The reality we are experiencing confirms the need to delve into the wounds that these decades of revolution have left in our soul as a people and to study how they have affected our culture and our political dynamics. This edition is a first approximation. It is up to us to find space and time to advance in that purpose.

Caracas, April 19, 2021

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Editor