

Democratización



Year 3, Issue 12

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Caracas.

Edited by Instituto FORMA

Introduction

In "Civilization, culture and spontaneity"¹, Ortega y Gasset reflects on the spiritual activities of man. It is a short and suggestive text. As on other occasions, the Spanish philosopher offers clues to encourage intellectual and existential curiosity. He does not pretend to exhaust themes or reach universals. It is rather an invitation to think. The author specifies three types of spiritual activities: *civilization* understood –in a broad sense– as the mechanisms that regulate and make human relationships possible, *culture* as "the decantation of our primordial powers and appetites" when we act and, finally, "*the original impetus of the psyche*" or the temperament that floods our being. All three are related. The first two –civilization and culture– are permeated by the third, which is why they vary according to time and space.

Let's do the non-exhaustive exercise of transferring these categories to the soul of a country. In *civilization*, we can find, among other things, the exercise of politics, which is understood as the space for exchange between people who share territories and interests. Different factors can affect its quality, but perhaps the most important is its relationship with justice. Venezuelans have a vital experience that allows us to see this with special clarity. When injustice abounds, politics becomes a hostile environment where violence and the use of force predominate. The reverse

1 "Civilization, culture and spontaneity" is a section included in "Don Quixote at school", an essay that Ortega y Gasset published in 1920 in response to the questioning that Antonio Zozaya would make of the inclusion of Cervantes' classic in children's school content and teenagers. I especially recommend it to educators –parents and teachers– who have had to rethink many things such as content and techniques during this pandemic.

occurs likewise: when justice prevails, peace and the use of reason do so as well.

Let's now have a look into *culture*. According to Ortega y Gasset, culture, in its human dimension, is “decantation of our primal powers and appetites, it is more than life, precipitated by vitality”. In the soul of a country, culture is the living product of its tradition, its history, its circumstances and its impulses. It is the translation of its wishes, fears, hopes, frustrations, affections and feelings. Cultural expressions are the testimony of a moment that transcends. Those who are part of that community put intelligence, talent and technique at the service of their homeland and materialize what –for better or for worse– is part of their being. Life is thus provided and goodness is produced, which is not so because it is good-willed, but because it is part of a shared heritage that reveals what we were, what we are or what we want to be, because it is a relevant part of our identity.

Now, let's move forward to the last type of spiritual activity: “*the original impetus of the psyche*”. I have dared to compare it to the human temperament. I must confess that when I first read the expression I thought of each of my children. I remembered how different they are. They were born to the same mother and the same father, but each is unique. They have a factory stamp... perhaps those are the “original impetus of the psyche” of Ortega y Gasset. The same is true for countries. They have their own temperaments. Solzhenitsyn referred to the “soul of the nations” and its custodians. For the Russian Nobel laureate, literature and language are the main protectors when the common spirit is threatened. Once again: it is culture that embraces the existence that animates it. That is why it is not surprising that the powerful who seek to hijack our conscience direct their attacks on the creators and promoters of culture. And thus, I continue with

temperament: the originator and the one that is forged along the way. Because those original impetus, if not natural, can be transformed over the years. And we see countries that after suffering terrible holocausts emerge from forgiveness or nations that remain trapped in a vicious cycle of revenge and terror.

As culture is the expression of the soul of the peoples and a fundamental element for the development of politics, we consider that it is a fundamental element to help understand the present moment. In this sense, this issue of *Democratización* is an approach to the current state of the five areas that resist in and for Venezuela: humor, education, art, anthropology and social media. We realize that it is a humble and limited approach, not exhaustive. And we reaffirm that the purpose of our publication is to contribute to the public debate, to give testimony and that each article opens doors for reflection. It is an invitation to think and, above all, to value the work of those who carry on despite the adversities they encounter along the way.

Our twelfth issue contains five articles: *Humor and politics*, by Laureano Márquez; *Education in the Venezuela of 21st century socialism. From equal opportunities to rhetorical egalitarianism*, by Tulio Ramírez; *Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant. Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us*, by Luis Carlos Díaz; *Thoughts on anthropological damage in Venezuela*, by Paola Bautista de Alemán, and *It is necessary to rise above the wounds to imagine ourselves in a network of relationships that includes us all*, an interview by Pedro Pablo Peñaloza with Mariela Ramírez, founder of the Dale Letra movement.

Caracas, Abril 16, 2021
Paola Bautista de Alemán
Editor

Humor and politics

Laureano Márquez P.

The connections between humor and politics are quite obvious. Political humor has a long history, since its beginnings in ancient times with Greek comedy until today. However, often times, humor that questions power is also, in turn, the object of questioning. For example, in Venezuela –which endures a political regime that denies democracy and freedoms–, some draw conclusions such as: “This is why we are in this situation: because we make a joke of everything”. This allows us to consider the two essential postulates that are usually formulated when studying the consequences of political humor, namely:

1. Political humor as an evasion mechanism, when fulfilling functions of collective catharsis. To the extent that people laugh at political problems, they release anger and frustrations that, without the presence of humor, would become factors of pressure and disagreement that would undermine the established power. In this sense, humor would contribute to maintaining certain structures of domination and would contribute in the preservation of the prevailing regime, by offering people the possibility of channeling the tensions generated by political, economic and social circumstances, and thus diverting reactions that could turn into violence. Political jokes, in this case, would be a kind of peaceful revenge for people who have lost their right to participate in political activity.

2. Political humor as a manifestation of disagreement, of desire for change and transformation of the prevailing order, as a way of expressing social discontent. From this point of view, humor has functions that transcend laughter, in fact, the more serious and momentous it is, the better. Thus, a humorous attitude would be correlated to analysis, criticism, dissent and, in many cases, the subversion of dictatorial, corrupt political systems that violate human rights.

In our opinion, humor produces various effects depending on the meaning, depth and ability to hit the bullseye of major political issues, which allow it to serve one or another of the purposes described. In the Soviet Union, for example, during the early days of the revolution, there was a lot of tolerance for political jokes, but as the paranoia of power increased, tolerance decreased, until a true persecution of humor began.

Something similar happened in Venezuela starting in 1999: theatrical shows such as “La reconstitutiva”, which parodied Chávez’s government in its beginnings, and which many of the regime’s ministers spectated, enjoyed complete tolerance. However, as democratic freedoms were dismantled, state theaters progressively closed their doors to dissident humor. Then, persecution and threats prevailed. In some cases, humorous presentations were hampered and attacked by violent pro-regime groups. Emblematic figures, such as the great graphic humorist Pedro León Zapata, became a target due to a political cartoon which then-President Hugo Chávez reacted to by publicly insulting and disqualifying the humorist.

Harassment of humor in dictatorial regimes is quite common. In the days of Juan Vicente Gómez, the two most important

comedians in the country, Leoncio Martínez (Leo) and Francisco Pimentel (Job Pim), paid for their witticism with jail time. In this regard, it is worth remembering an ingenious anecdote of Job Pim: several times he was admitted into the famous prison of La Rotunda, and on one occasion, when he was interrogated by the warden and asked about his profession, he replied: "political prisoner". Faced with the authority's demand that he speak seriously, he said: "Do you think you allow me to practice any other profession?"

In all dictatorships, whether rightist or leftist, humor is always perceived as a threat, because it becomes a space for dissent, a refuge for freedom, and a stronghold for critical thought. In the face of repression, humor always finds a way to sneak in and evade censorship. Preventing a good joke from being spread is almost impossible. The greater the inability to laugh, the stronger humor will be. In the times in which we live, control is much more difficult due to the multiplicity of social networks that facilitate communication and the intensity of their use.

New limitations for political humor are present today, in relation to what has come to be called "political correctness". Humor is frequently questioned in this sense, with the aggravating factor that the criteria for "being correct" vary or fluctuate according to ideological currents that maintain –not infrequently– double standards, an ambiguous moral that produces unequal treatment depending on the political standpoint from which criticisms are made.

Political humor is not limited exclusively to political jokes, although this is usually one of the most frequent manifestations. One of the virtues of political humor is its ability to capture briefly and amusingly what a political scientist or an economist would

require several pages or perhaps a whole book to express. In the days when the Soviet Union was crumbling, one of the devices frequently used by the then-President of the United States, Ronald Regan, was to resort to jokes. This one, which he told once, forcefully summarized the failure of the Soviet regime:

An assistant approaches President Gorbachev and says:
“There is a woman outside the Kremlin who will not leave until you take her in”.

*–Call her in, –says Gorbachev, and he asks the woman–
What’s happening?*

The woman says:

–I have a question.

–Go ahead, tell me, –says Gorbachev.

–Was communism invented by a politician or a scientist?

–It was invented by a politician, –he says.

–That explains it –says the woman—. The scientist would have tried it on mice first.

In times of revolution, such as the one that Venezuela faces, the reaction with which power reacts most frequently in the face of humor is that of intolerance. However, wit allows evading controls and censorship. On the other hand, attacks on comedians always raise suspicions of an intransigent power. When other forms of communication have been silenced or confiscated, humor lingers, for it is a heritage of culture as old as man himself, the resource that he always had at hand to cheer himself up in the face of adversity and to not lose hope. In times of revolution, humor is the refuge of freedom.

Education in the Venezuela of 21st century socialism. From equal opportunities to rhetorical egalitarianism

Tulio Ramírez

Introduction

The issue of equal opportunities is brought forth once more to the discussion table of social sciences. The irruption of egalitarianism in the rhetoric of the enemies of the free market and democratic societies has cornered one of the constitutive principles of the ethos of capitalist societies under the blow of the exclusive neoliberal, that of equal opportunities.

The anti-capitalist narrative has tried to subtract progressive force from the term that indicates societies' obligation to guarantee freedoms and conditions that enable the development of citizens' potential, to reach the levels of well-being and progress that they are capable of achieving by themselves, with no limitations other than their attitudes, skills and regulations that prevent the trampling of third parties in that race towards prosperity.

By imposing the collective over the individual in this narrative, all initiative is subordinated to the achievement of the common good. Thus, education, a classic and effective mechanism of upward social mobility, is assigned the mission of ideologically

training the new generations in values that guarantee the approval of a political project with a vocation to perpetuate it in power.

One of these values is that of “egalitarianism”. More than a value, it would be the eternal promise that would settle the inequalities generated by the capitalist system.

Now, this rhetoric is not exclusive to orthodox socialisms. It has crossed those borders and has become entrenched in populist projects as one of its most effective insignia to gain the sympathy and support of the masses.

In these pages, we will analyze the Venezuelan case seeking to monitor the transition from what we could call a political model with a vocation for social welfare and a promoter of equal opportunities to a socialist political model with populist ingredients, which has led education to no longer be the most efficient mechanism for social advancement in Venezuela.

Equal opportunities. Different approaches

Non-Marxist sociology has developed the concept of equal opportunity very extensively. The conceptual development of this notion in the field of social sciences originated from the evident situation of inequality that the capitalist production system begot from its inception.

Inequality has been approached from different perspectives. Authors such as Weber¹ studied it from the point of view of the *status* that the person occupies in society; Parsons² approached

1 Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

2 Talcott Parsons, *Estructura y Proceso en las sociedades modernas* (Madrid: CSIC, 1966).

it from the *prestige*; Dahrendorf³, from the inequality generated by *power* and *authority*; and Lensky⁴, from the concept of *privilege*. For his part, Marx⁵ analyzes the issue as a consequence of the *ownership or not of the means of production*.

Regardless of the theoretical approach, what is clear is that the presence of inequality among men forces, either for economic, ethical or political reasons, to think about the necessary compensations to minimize or definitively eliminate the enormous gap between those who have and those who do not have means to procure a certain adequate standard of living.

Depending on the approach and the diagnosis on the causes of inequality, different solutions were rationalized and proposed. For example, orthodox Marxists propose that the solution passes through the extinction of what causes inequality, that is, eliminating the property regime of the means of production. In this way, property is socialized and wealth is administered by the State once it is seized by the historically oppressed class. Of course, this situation will continue until the arrival of communism when the State will disappear and equality between men is the norm and not the exception.

A more compensatory approach assumes that inequalities are collateral effects of a social and economic system that favors free will and free competition, where those with the best aptitudes and attitudes to be successful survive. From this approach, the fight against inequality is undertaken from the generation of equal opportunities so that everyone, regardless of their place on the social scale, can access wealth and well-being based on their

3 Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class conflict in Industrial Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).

4 Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege* (Princeton University Press, 1966).

5 Karl Marx, *18 Brumario* (Madrid: Alberto Corazón, 1976).

effort. That is to say that the place one occupies today does not determine which one they will occupy tomorrow.

Therefore, the inequality-equality binomial has occupied political thought and action. An important fact is that despite that the diagnoses are different and the alternative solutions are, thus, also different, there is an element in common, namely, the recognition of the existence of inequality and the need to reverse or minimize it.

We will focus, for now, on the Marxist point of view. It is evident that real socialism, inspired by Marxism-Leninism, rather than making inequality disappear, has generated other types of inequalities as perverse as those generated by the most radical capitalist liberalism. Historical evidence has shown that in these types of regimes a Parasitic Nomenclature of the State is created that uses the wealth generated by a population that is far removed from it.

So, behind a rhetoric that justifies the disappearance of social classes for the sake of equality among men hides a political model that is perpetuated over time, thanks to the curtailment of freedoms and dependence on a State that distributes poverty and feeds individuals' dependence on the government.

That egalitarian propaganda that fuels an illusion of a better future in the masses is then kept in impeccable and refined use. The arguments to justify the non-realization of equality revolve around two ideas that are always present in official speeches: a) equality will be achieved once the eternal process of "building socialism" is concluded; b) equality has not been achieved due to "attacks generated by the enemies of the revolution". This never fulfilled prophecy is what I have come to call rhetorical and utopian egalitarianism. It is a kind of promise eternally

unfulfilled, which has served as a spark to overthrow regimes and, once overthrown, to maintain the hope of those who have the least.

From another perspective, democracy as a political model has assumed a variety of positions on the issue. These range from radical liberalism to recent welfare positions.

The liberal tradition maintains that the issue of inequality is naturally inherent to the model of society based on the free market. In a world where free competition reigns, it is the survival of the fittest that determines inequality. In their sphere of freedom, individuals choose to compete or not. Those who compete contribute to individual and social progress. Those who do not compete, or who do not have the skills to do so, will become part of the natural hindrance of a system that did not deny them the freedom to compete.

Less radical positions hold that social equality in a market system is achieved when opportunities are open to all. So, together with the concept of social equality, the concept of equal opportunities is introduced, alluding to the freedom that society offers the individual to develop their full potential to be inserted in the economic circuit and achieve wealth and social well-being⁶.

From this point of view, the market society would guarantee individual development from the umbrella of freedom. Success would be based on individual action and the deregulation of everything that could impede the development of that potential. From this logic, everyone goes out to compete under the same conditions, with individual differences that will determine the

6 Carlota Solé, "El concepto de igualdad ante el mercado", *Revista española de investigaciones Sociológicas* I, no. 75 (1996): 21

success of some and the failure of others. Inequality would be the natural collateral effect of this dynamic of the exercise of freedom.

Faced with this classic vision, the populist formulas that have hit Latin American countries to a great extent lie at the other extreme. For regimes marked by populism, the issue of social equality is the center of political discourse. For Bobbio⁷, populist political formulas are those that consider the people as a homogeneous social group and as the exclusive depository of positive, specific and permanent values, being the main source of inspiration and constant object of reference by the leader. The populist discourse does not need political organizations as an intermediary, although they exist and are the organizational base of the charismatic leader.

Latin America as a whole was a breeding ground for the development of populism. Countries whose independence wars were forged by improvised armies under the command of Generals from the oligarchic classes, who, to attract landless peasants to their ranks, promised land, bread and work. The hope of owning land more than achieving independence was what configured a populist scheme of doing politics from the earliest moments of the nascent republics.

This political culture extended throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century when the military dictatorships were overthrown and democratic regimes were established throughout the region. This change in the political model did not mean the disappearance of populism as a strategy to capture wills. On the contrary, it was exacerbated as a consequence of

7 Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalismo y Democracia* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996).

the need to captivate the masses to win their votes in the nascent electoral contests.

Populism, in addition to its rhetoric full of promises of social redemption, must be accompanied by a distribution mechanism to maintain the illusion of fulfillment of what was promised to the disinherited masses. The precarious public treasury is used for the distribution of gifts without demanding any compensation, beyond loyalty to the leader and the Party, linking impoverished majorities to the government via dependence.

Populist models tend to be of fragile sustainability since their governance resides in a distributive policy that does not encourage individual entrepreneurship or capital investment. This strategy, together with eventual expropriations to fulfill the promise of “giving exploiters a hard time”, create an environment of legal uncertainty that scares away any possibility of incoming national or foreign capital.

For populist regimes, social inequality is fought by distributing among those who do not have the wealth generated by the exploitation of natural resources that are in the hands of the State, by the imposition of exaggerated taxes on those who generate wealth or the confiscation of assets and properties to later be graciously distributed. The result is impoverished societies, with high levels of unemployment and poor public services. When these regimes cannot fulfill their promises due to lack of resources, they have to resort to repression to circumvent the claims and protests of a citizenry accustomed to receiving everything from the State.

Populism developed in the framework of societies with democratic regimes characterized by the peaceful alternation of power is another variant. This is the case of some Central American

countries that, even though are not efficient in generating wealth and maintaining good living conditions for the population, have been able to persist because the parties that have monopolized the sympathy of the great impoverished masses share the same populist political practices.

A third perspective is derived from democratic models with a social welfare approach. Its origins date back to the thrive of productivity with Taylorist and Fordist techniques and to the increasing automation of the industry. The increase in productivity in the United States meant the substantial improvement of wages, incorporating the mass of workers into consumption, with the well-known improvement of the quality of life.

Faced with the growth of wealth as a result of work, countless social demands in health, education and social services skyrocketed. In recent decades, citizens went from demanding the State only the protection of their freedoms, to demanding guarantees of greater social equality and the enjoyment of opportunities to improve the quality of life.

The distributive policy was based on social investment rather than direct subsidy. This is one of the differences with populism. State resources are invested to generate conditions of equality within a framework of freedoms that encourages private initiative and the potentially productive development of individuals.

By implementing universal social service insurance policies, opportunities are equalized, considerably reducing the causes that could originate labor and social conflicts due to the improvement of living conditions.

Of course, as in any society whose State must have sufficient resources to achieve certain universal standards of living, any

situation of economic crisis that reduces GDP and therefore the amount of government resources through taxes, will cause collapses of these services, altering social peace in claiming acquired rights interrupted or abruptly minimized.

In these cases, the solidity of the institutions to make the corresponding adjustments and the maturity of the citizens will be key elements to overcome the difficulties without generating major political cataclysms.

Pre-Chavista democracy: opening and exhaustion of a range of opportunitiess

After a long tradition of military governments, with a very brief experience of civil government in 1945, Venezuela arrived at a democratic political model as of 1958. A coalition of political parties, together with the support of sectors of the Armed Forces, managed to remove General Marcos Pérez Jiménez from power. Once the dictatorship fell, this coalition organized democratic elections within a framework of freedom, progress, and social investment that continued to grow during the first two decades of democratic government.

During this period, the employment rate increased due to the emergence of new industries created with the help and financial aid of the Venezuelan State. This resulted in the migration of the peasant population to cities and industrial regions, increasing the demand for housing, health and education.

Employment was boosted thanks to the construction of roads, houses and industries. In terms of health, the Venezuelan Institute of Social Security was created to care for the health of workers, their pensions for disability and retirement. Schools were also built throughout the country to answer the educational needs of

the majorities, a debt that was due since the independence war until the mid 20th century.

Resources derived from oil royalties underpinned social spending in the creation of universal services. For a political scientist like Juan Carlos Rey, more than the establishment of a Welfare State, what he calls a Populist Conciliation System was organized in the country, consisting of a complex system of negotiation and accommodation of heterogeneous interests, in which the mechanisms of a utilitarian nature were going to play a central role in generating support for the regime and, consequently, in maintaining it⁸.

Without detracting from such an interesting appreciation, we rather believe that it was a modest but effective economic policy of Social Welfare, implemented in the context of a populist political dynamic as a means to attract the support of mostly popular social sectors, but at the same time multi-class by the alliances with influential economic and intellectual elites, to gain access to power through democratic means.

In our opinion, important achievements were made in terms of social policy thanks to oil. The first 20 years of post-dictatorship democracy consolidated a robust middle class and a union sector that, although not totally independent from political parties, developed a protest action that guaranteed acceptable working conditions for the majority of workers.

Perhaps the greatest achievement was obtained in education. The school infrastructure that still persists today throughout the national territory was built then. In the most remote corners you could find schools and lyceums in the cities allowed the academic

8 Juan Carlos Rey, La democracia venezolana y la crisis del sistema populista de conciliación, *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, no. 54 (1991): 543.

continuity of that great mass of children who joined the school system in the early 60s. By 1958 there were little more than 850,000 students enrolled at all levels of the educational system, a figure that increased by 496% by 1978, reaching more than 4 million.

The Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Foundation, created in 1975, sent thousands of Venezuelans to the best universities in the world to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees. Those professionals then returned to invest their newfound knowledge in the country.

At the fall of the dictatorship in 1958 there were only three public colleges (Central University of Venezuela, Andes University and University of Zulia) and two private universities (Santa María University and Andrés Bello Catholic University). Twenty years later autonomous universities rose from three to five with the University of Carabobo and the University of Oriente. Private universities increased from two to fifteen and the new category of experimental universities under the Ministry of Education amounted to sixteen by 1999⁹.

This policy of social investment was being restricted to the extent that oil income was decreasing. As of the famous Black Friday of February 1983, when the Bolívar –a currency that until then was among the strongest in Latin America– was devalued, a prolonged economic crisis began that added up to a political crisis of legitimacy of the parties that until then had rotated power in Venezuela.

Generalized corruption, the loss of leadership of the major parties, the reduction in social spending, the increase in unemployment, inflation, the increase in crime and the progressive

9 Reinaldo Rojas, *Historia de la Universidad en Venezuela, Rhela 7* (2005): 73-98.

deterioration of the quality of life, among other factors, paved the terrain for a good part of the population to favor the frustrated attempts of *coups d'état* led by Hugo Chávez and later vote him into the Presidency of the Republic in 1998.

An electoral campaign with a populist, vindicating and righteous language captivated just over 30% of voters who, in the face of scattered candidacies and a high percentage of abstention, led retired Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez to the presidency of the republic. The promise to destroy the corrupt elites, to “fry the heads of the *adecos* in oil” and to “pay the social debt contracted by the poor”, began a honeymoon phase between Chávez and the poor that allowed him to survive the oil strike at the end of 2002, the events of April 11, 2002 and the 2004 recall.

Chávez deployed a series of populist policies that set off the alarms of the productive sectors of the country and of the political class displaced from power. However, with oil income recovered by the rise in prices, Chavismo was able to capitalize on the most impoverished sectors thanks to social programs in education, housing, health and various subsidies, only sustainable given what was generated by the commercialization of crude oil.

In the midst of the populist distribution of oil income, misguided economic policies were implemented that discouraged investment in productive areas and made capital migrate to other countries, leading to company closures. The expropriations of businesses, factories and productive lands, labor immobility, price controls and the prevalence of an increasingly threatening presidential discourse against private companies bred a climate of legal insecurity and growing disinvestment which led to a prolonged economic contraction.

The Chavista period: educating to progress or to reproduce poverty?

Following the death of Chávez and the rise of Nicolás Maduro through severely contested elections, the country's economic situation had not improved. On the contrary, the persistent fall in oil prices coupled with disinvestment in the oil industry, and the deepening of the populist policy of subsidies and handouts to maintain citizen control, deterred potential capital that could boost an economy that was sinking due to the weight of corruption, poor management, hyperinflation and the bleeding populism of the precarious national treasury.

By 2017, the minimum wage had shrunk behind those paid by Cuba and Haiti. By 2018, Venezuelans received just US \$15.96 a month as minimum wage, by then the lowest in the region. By January 2021, the minimum wage did not even exceed US \$1 a month. The ENCOVI survey carried out in 2019¹⁰ revealed poverty levels of around 80% of the population.

The GDP has been in free fall since 2016. The slowdown of the economy in that year represented 44.3% less than the GDP of 2013¹¹. According to figures from the Central Bank of Venezuela, the Venezuelan economy had contracted by 15% in 2018 for the fifth consecutive year. For 2021, a 2-digit decline is expected.

Inflation rates have been growing like a tsunami since 2017. This increase was greater than 50% per month, closing each year-end with a percentage greater than 160%. This huge inflationary

10 Anitza Freitez (Coord) *Espejo de la crisis humanitaria venezolana*. (ENCOVI 2018, UCAB, UCV, USB). <https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2019>.

11 Banco Central de Venezuela, *Indicadores económicos*, (2020) <http://www.bcv.org.ve/#>

wave made Venezuela one of the three countries with the highest rates in the world. For 2021, an inflation of 100,000% is expected.

Regarding unemployment rates, the World Bank indicates that the government declared that unemployment was at 14.02% in 2015. The closure of companies, expropriations and low productivity increased unemployment in 2018 by 33.3%. In 2019, The International Monetary Fund¹² projected that by 2021 Venezuela would have an unemployment rate of 52%. It should be noted that these figures do not include underemployment or temporary and informal workers who, according to government statistics, are employed.

As for public services, since 2017, water began to become scarce, blackouts became common and telephone communications service began to deteriorate. It is noteworthy that in March 2019 Venezuela experienced the longest blackout in its history. It lasted between five and seven continuous days, depending on the regions. The lack of maintenance and investment in new technologies meant that the failures in the hydroelectric plants did not take long. In terms of connectivity, the country is located in the last eleven countries in the world.

The deterioration of education had already been foretold from the middle of the second decade of the year 2000. After an explosion of enrollment in all educational levels from the year 2003 by educational missions and the announcement of a supposed early victory in the field of literacy of adults, it is verified that, since 2007, school enrollment has dropped considerably. The most serious decline was in the initial grades where, according to

12 Fondo Monetario Internacional, *Perspectivas Económicas Regionales, REO* (Octubre 2020). En <https://www.imf.org/es/Publications/REO/WH/Issues/2020/10/13/regional-economic-outlook-western-hemisphere>

the figures provided by the Venezuelan Educational Memory, an average of 3 million students remained outside the classrooms by 2018¹³.

The change to online education due to the effects of the pandemic brought with it a decrease of approximately 4,967,660 students at all educational levels, according to figures provided by the Annual Venezuelan Educational Memory Bulletin published in January 2021. Furthermore, there is the gap between those who have access to technology and connectivity and those who do not, which has considerably widened inequality. The same has to do with educational quality, a matter pending evaluation when the pandemic ends.

Chávez's populist measures in education since 2002 were sustained thanks to high oil prices. His interest was to show enrollment statistics as if they were trophies of the revolution. It was about emulating Cuban propaganda as the most inclusive country in the region, while efforts to ideologize the school were repeatedly frustrated by the rejection of civil society to the different curricular proposals, more focused on training revolutionary militants than to educate quality students.

The stridency in terms of educational achievements was decreasing to the extent that huge budgetary resources were no longer available. Along with insufficient resources, the pandemic exacerbated the educational crisis that had dragged on since 2006. Not only in terms of the progressive decline in school attendance, since now the gap between those who have, or not, access to remote education is widening due to the lack of signal, equipment

13 Memoria Educativa Venezolana, Indicadores de escolaridad del sistema educativo escolar venezolano. Enero 2020 a Enero de 2021. *Boletín Memoria Educativa Venezolana* (2021). En: <http://saber.ucv.ve/handle/10872/20937>

or teachers trained in online education. Not to mention the high rates of teacher and faculty resignations for receiving paltry salaries that do not exceed US \$4 a month at best.

As for autonomous universities, the situation is just as dire. Budget suffocation has reached limit levels. These institutions today do not have the resources to even replace light bulbs. Teachers earn less than US \$10 a month and many have become part of the diaspora. This decapitalization of teachers and researchers has impacted scientific productivity in Venezuela. By 1998, Venezuela generated 4.8% of the scientific articles produced in Latin America and the Caribbean¹⁴. By 2020, this figure dropped to less than 0.3%¹⁵.

In 20 years of socialism in the 21st century, the Venezuelan middle class has become impoverished. Education, despite the peaks in enrollment growth and the creation of new universities, has not contributed to developing mechanisms for social advancement. It is pertinent to remember the words of a minister of education who in 2014 stated: “We are not lifting people out of poverty so that they join the middle class and aspire to become like the *scrawny*”^{16,17}. These words clearly outline the intention of education in revolution which is not the achievement of prosperity.

14 Tulio Ramírez y Audy Salcedo, Inversión y productividad científica en Venezuela. ¿Una relación inversamente proporcional? *Revista de Pedagogía* 37, no. 101 (2016): 147-174.

15 Tulio Ramírez, La universidad autónoma venezolana y su lucha por sobrevivir al socialismo del Siglo XXI. Cinco propuestas para su rescate, *Revista Universidades* 71, no. 83 (2020): 53 a 72. ISSN: 2007-53-40.

16 Common term used to identify members the opposition, considered elites by the government.

17 “No es que vamos a sacar a la gente de la pobreza para que se conviertan en clase media y aspiren ser escuálidos”. Héctor Rodríguez, Statements at the MMPE (2014). En: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7jb4koFi1M>

Once the pandemic is over, the generalized poverty situation will very likely continue to stimulate the diaspora of teachers of all educational levels, as well as the resignations of these professionals to undertake higher-paid jobs. The government will face this situation with the populist strategy of offering teaching positions to supporters who do not have the qualifications or the skills to teach. This will deprofessionalize the teaching career, which would further decline the already questioned academic quality of our students, from primary education to university.

Brief comment to conclude

Populist propaganda is based on the promise of “downward” egalitarianism. If, according to Chávez, “being rich is bad”, then simple logic would lead to conclude that being poor is good. This isolated phrase announced to Venezuelans the orientation of the revolution in economic and social matters. Their revolutionary logic intends egalitarian social programs not to get people out of poverty, but to instead establish themselves in it.

These programs have been financed with resources from third parties, whether private or from the national treasury. This establishes a difference with social welfare policies that promote or guarantee equal opportunities from an investment financed by the whole society through taxes or profits generated by State companies, but never based on outburst and confiscation of the proceeds generated by the private initiative. This is the great difference between populism and a democratic, responsible political model with political control by society through the institutions of the State.

It is precisely because of the lack of this control and the prevailing impunity that waste and embezzlement reign in

populist regimes. In them, the institutions of control tend to be in the hands of the Nomenclature, benefiting from the sweetness of power and turning a blind eye to prevailing corruption.

The need to maintain power at all costs, once all the wealth has been squandered, equates ideological and dictatorial regimes such as Cuba's or North Korea's with their populist variants with rootless democratic garb, such as Venezuela's and Nicaragua's.

In every case, the mission assigned to education is to sediment in the conscience of new generations the support necessary to perpetuate these political models, not to ensure that citizens can get out of a generalized poverty inherent to a political system that is proven inefficient in terms of economy and impoverishing regarding social life.

Since the web was strong enough, they called in another elephant¹. Social networks in Venezuela: the web that connects us

Luis Carlos Díaz

The adoption of social networks in Venezuela enjoyed moments of freedom and development that were later frustrated until the further on disconnection, censorship and contraction of telecommunications. What remains today are spaces with certain innovative margins of autonomy and capacity for social pressure, but which live under the constant threat of hegemony and its arbitrariness. Social networks changed us, but, on their own, they do not solve the absence of a democracy in which they would operate better.

In 2021, Venezuela goes through its second year in a global pandemic, confined, economically bankrupt, and squeezing out the maximum capacities of its Internet connections. The world is urgently adapting to telecommuting, tele-education and the

1 This title references the popular nursery rhyme “*Un elefante se balanceaba*”, which sings the story of an elephant swinging on a spider web and progressively inviting more elephants to join until it gives in.

consumption of streaming entertainment. Venezuela, on the other hand, tries to do the same, but with an average bandwidth lower than that of Haiti, Palestine, Rwanda or Somalia². At the same time, we are living a complex humanitarian crisis. With each post on social media we risk our freedom or our lives, but we also follow the latest TikTok trends, we access the world through Netflix, we talk on Twitter and we experience the presidential elections of other countries that actually do have real election processes as if they were our own. And all of this we do unevenly.

Let's explain better how the spider web of Venezuelan networking has gotten to this point and how we keep fighting on. First: the world. Venezuela has experienced a process of digital transformation and technological adoption very similar to that of Latin America; at times it was even at the forefront of the region in terms of connectivity. Until the first decade of the 21st century, there were innovations in the area, competitiveness, large investments, and even some global companies had offices in Venezuela or presented their products for the region here. Then, oil prices rocketed and dollars were subsidized by exchange controls between 2006 and 2012, thus favoring investments in the telecom sector. Those were years in which, in parallel to the massive purchase of telephones –does anyone remember the ostentatious Blackberry?–, Venezuelans also increased their presence on social networks, which were used for organizing protests, electoral coverage, graduate meetings and new waves of digital marketing. Part of that web, of that net, still resists today.

2 Ookla's global index revised in April 2021 places Venezuela in positions 142 and 138 in both bandwidth and mobile speed. <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>. Both appear "improved" due to the new fiber optic installation of private companies. However, CANTV's connections, which the majority of the population depends on, are still the slowest on the continent with 2mbps on average.

Venezuelan darkness

Everything was quite similar to the rest of the social phenomena associated with citizen power that were experienced in social media in other countries. Technologies became widespread and the use of social networks became part of the daily routine of millions of people, because the companies that owned these platforms simplified the way in which users could claim their part of the Internet to create content, build communities, surf a wave of interactions, and be fascinated by the proposals of each digital neighborhood.

The Venezuelan particularities while this was happening marked the following decade³:

1. In 2010, the parliament reformed the Organic Telecommunications Law to give the Internet a “public interest” character, which later implied the interference of the State in connectivity fees, investments in the sector, difficulties in importing equipment. These controls had the same consequences as the rest of the national economy: scarcity, lagging and contraction. Much of the failures of private Internet companies are explained by this political decision: controlling their rates made them operate at a loss and deteriorate. To recover is now more expensive and there is no financing for companies or users.
2. That same parliament amended the “Resorte Law”, which regulated social responsibility in radio and television, in order to also include “digital media” among its

3 The best report on this issue was written by researchers Marianne Díaz Hernández and Raisa Urribarri (2018): *Public policies for Internet access in Venezuela*, https://www.derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/CPI_venezuela.pdf

competencies for content surveillance. This amendment was nonsense because that law was made to administer a scarce asset, such as the radioelectric spectrum from which frequencies are assigned to radio stations and television channels. The Internet is neither scarce nor meets those criteria, but legislators with malicious intent, ignorant by choice, placed it in that same category. In fact, in 2021 they want to replicate the formula for content on social media to be penalized.

3. Since 2009, Decree 6,649 signed by Chávez established that the Internet was a luxury expense that should be cut. With this, they were undermining connectivity and technological advancements in the main universities in the country.
4. The nationalization of CANTV, later destroyed at the hands of corrupt and ineffective managers, accumulated millions of faults and disconnections in communities of the country that were already connected. These new exclusions are monstrous and have plunged a fair part of the country into darkness, void of information, right after having been in touch with modernity.
5. Between 2010 and 2020, Venezuela became the country in America with the most blocked web pages. It started with pages that discussed the electrical corruption of Derwick, electoral polls and the price of the parallel dollar, and then Conatel (the censoring body) lengthened this process by blocking social networks such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, platforms such as YouTube and even pornographic pages in an absolutely discretionary manner. Even for just minutes, when the National Assembly elected

in 2015 was streaming a broadcast on social media, which are the only channels they have left⁴.

6. To this magnitude of repression we can add the most horrifying part of Chavismo, which is the criminalization of dozens of citizens for content published on social media. Venezuela holds all the continental records in this matter, and it not only includes open trials against citizens, activists and journalists, but also disappearances, beatings, executions, torture, false incriminations, dismissals, exiles, and other practices of State terrorism that constitute crimes against humanity. Some of them have been included in the report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission⁵, such as the case of Pedro Jaimes and a dozen Twitter commentators who were imprisoned.

All these elements support the assertion of the report about freedom on the net by Freedom House⁶ that categorizes Venezuela as “Not free”, with a score of 28 points out of 100, right below dictatorships such as Sudan, Iran, Egypt and even Congo. The data are impressive when we review them under international standards, because the Caribbean laxity and the amount of years submersed in this crisis, gradually losing freedoms and public spaces, often make us believe that things are better than they really are. It is a falsehood often repeated that “in Venezuela you can still say what you want”. If we take a second look, we will find that there are people who have been tortured, whose ribs

4 The Venezuelan NGO that measures digital blocks is Venezuela, unfiltered: <http://vesinfiltro.com/>

5 Detailed report, especially case 12 and details about Pedro Jaimes: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A_HRC_45_CRP.11_SP.pdf

6 Freedom of the net report, 2020: <https://freedomhouse.org/es/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2020>

have been broken, who have disappeared and who have been threatened to death and persecuted for not saying anything or for stating the obvious. It doesn't matter if it was a tweet⁷, a tiktok that talks about the daughter of an *enchufado*^{8,9}, a condemning WhatsApp status¹⁰ or a post on Facebook¹¹. Power is arbitrary and tries to build silence and impunity. Despite that, the web stays strong.

Contraction disconnects

Another worrying element of connectivity in Venezuela is access capacity. We are short of recent statistics because the market is so depressed that there is neither incentive nor budget to do in-depth studies to see the shifts. What data published in 2020 by Conatel itself shows is that the country has fewer people connected to the Internet than there were a few years ago. The most egregious figure is the loss of active cell phones. Venezuela went from having more than 30 million phones to less than 14 million active phones in about 4 years. The company that lost the most users was Movilnet, another nationalized company together with CANTV. Not everything is the effect of the 5 million Venezuelans who have fled the country, but also of the poverty which the

7 Digital Rights: *Jailed for tweeting* <https://www.derechosdigitales.org/12273/encarcelado-por-tuitear/>

8 An *enchufado* is someone who has earned certain goods or a certain position by means of pulling strings with friends in high places and who is likely undeserving.

9 José Pérez, *the tiktokar arrested for criticizing Omar Enrique's daughter*. <https://eldiario.com/2021/03/14/omar-enrique-criticas-hika-tiktokar-detenido/>

10 DGCIM *Arrested gynecologist in Lara for criticizing a Maduro official on WhatsApp*. <https://talcualdigital.com/dgcim-arresto-a-ginecologo-en-lara-por-criticar-en-whatsapp-a-un-funcionario-de-maduro/>

11 *What we know about the arrest of writers Milagros Mata Gil and Juan Muñoz*. <https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/lo-que-se-sabe-sobre-la-detencion-de-los-escritores-milagros-mata-y-juan-munoz/>

majority of the population was forced into. Poor wages made the cost of replacing technologies, buying gadgets and keeping them up to date unaffordable for most families. Technology grew old, replacing a stolen or damaged phone became impossible to afford and the amount of equipments in middle and lower-class homes –9 out of 10 in the country– decreased.

That is why it is roughly calculated that between 14 and 15 million people have Internet, so users of social media could reach around 10 to 12 million people within the country, to which the diaspora that remains connected and active should be added for consideration.

The economic contraction generated new disconnections and today some companies are trying to bring Venezuelan society up to date, but this is only a bubble phenomenon: the Internet *bodega*¹². Since 2019, fiber optic connections, wireless internet and some satellite service providers have been obtained in Venezuela (in border states there are several from Colombia and Brazil), but their installation capacity depends on those who can pay their costs, which range from \$400 to \$1,500 US dollars to install plus a monthly rate from \$40 to \$250. Again, only a few can afford such a service.

A positive element in the chaos is that since 2019 customs have been opened, freeing imports from tax charges, so the cell phone market was nurtured again. This has allowed the supply and availability of equipment to increase, especially those of

12 During the past years, a new form of bodega (*bodegón*, in Spanish) has materialized in Venezuela as a space to sell imported goods which had not been seen in the country for years due to harsh restrictions and little purchasing power, but which only very few can afford. Today, they seem to swarm the streets, creating an illusion of well-being and economic power.

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the lower mid-range (between \$90 and \$200) that allow users to connect to the Internet and to use various applications. Those who receive sufficient remittances or who have income in dollars that allow them to save and buy equipment have been able to take better advantage of these shipments, although the fact that there are no credit purchases makes it difficult for more families to access these services. However, even with these elephants, the web is still strong.

Infocitizenship is power

The spider web that constitutes our relationships woven by networking has experienced modernity and the closure of democratic spaces, thus adapting to our environment. On the one hand, these networks have accompanied us in the process of falling into the pit (and enlightening ourselves in it), but on the other hand, they are already incorporated into our logic, which is why we are not North Korea or Cuba, which are barely discovering the Internet and its possibilities. For Venezuelans, social networks are used for the same entertainment, education and information purposes that apply in many countries, but with two particular components: they serve as proof of life in an environment that is dangerous, agonizing and in which it is important to keep our close contacts up to date. They also serve to meet the information needs of the hyper-informed and hyper-politicized who know that they will not get much material from the null national television, the extinct press and limited radio. In this sense, the Internet is not just another element in the media ecosystem that citizens consume, but actually the only space with margins of freedom, independence and flexibility that people have at hand, which is what makes it so terrible that half of the country is disconnected.

Networks such as Twitter, Instagram and the private but viral archipelagos of WhatsApp groups allow the motorization of opinions, interpretations and campaigns that directly reject the dictatorship and its propaganda apparatus. Its deployment has allowed “infocitizens” to put their two superpowers to the test: changing the climate of public opinion and generating mobilizations, even without other media to echo it.

This phenomenon continues to be persecuted and penalized, but it finds more creative ways to outwit power. In essence, social networks depend on the levels of trust that their participants build and the attention they pay to each other. Trust and attention are the currencies of exchange on the Internet and that is why people work to strengthen their communities, generate content and nurture interactions that give spirit of body to those who share. When that happens, and when there is also an absence of other public spaces, the result is vital relationships and powerful causes.

Whether it is meant to diffuse art, social causes, complaints, indignation or hope, social networks are vehicles for modern citizen demonstrations. It is absolutely understandable that in parallel there is a critical corpus on “the addiction of social media”¹³, the “surveillance capitalism”¹⁴ and the machinery of control that can be hidden behind every network in the hands of large emporiums or governments¹⁵ as well as on the risks of digital security, organized crime and other phenomena. But in an environment of traditional media, where the silence of censorship

13 *The Social Dilemma* - Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/co/title/81254224>

14 *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, by Shoshana Zuboff. <https://nuso.org/articulo/capitalismo-de-vigilancia/>

15 *Internet, politics and the politics of the internet* debate. <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/articulos/internet-la-politica-y-la-politica-del-debate-sobre-internet/>

and the noise of government propaganda apparatus abound, these networks appear as non-places that convene, build and strengthen citizen ties. It is what remains for people who live in undemocratic societies and without an abundance of informational and cultural offerings.

We cannot think of a modern citizenship without incorporating this second layer of skin that is hyperconnectivity. The Internet allows subjects to be delocalized, which makes them part of groups gathered on the basis of interests, so their deliberation and decision-making processes are accelerated and improved. Also, the Internet, in its 2.0 stage, which has been in existence for more than 15 years, allows millions of people to create content and publish it without knowing having any type of computer science knowledge or having to cover the infrastructure or design costs involved in owning web pages. What's more, a new advantage is that infocitizens who feed their online profiles actually build versions of themselves in which their content remains public, generating interactions, search engine optimization, all of which fuels an asynchronous conversation between individuals. It is fascinating and at the same time evolutionary: humanity incorporates these changes and redesigns the development of the knowledge society.

All these phenomena open a new compass for human rights, such as freedom of expression, association, privacy and access to information, because it expands them. Even in countries without the rule of law and that tend towards totalitarianism, the very existence of the Internet serves as a container for some abuses of power because it makes them visible, vulnerable, challenges them, and holds repressors accountable. That is why the "Not free" countries apply different strategies against social networks, not just brutal censorship. Sometimes they use propaganda, the

fake news industry, confusion, astroturfing¹⁶ (faking spontaneous citizen movements that are actually programmed and coordinated to impose issues on the agenda), selective blockades or exemplary punishments against cyberactivists to inhibit the rest. In fact, where these regimes that make sophisticated attacks against the Internet affect the most is precisely when they pervert trust in the digital environment, when they infiltrate citizen conversations to radicalize them or when they make people feel guilty because they accuse them of “hate crimes” by manipulating what that actually means.

Given this scenario, striving for connectivity in Venezuela and a safe and free Internet for people actually requires addressing such basic problems as replacing old copper pairs with fiber optics and also increasing the quality of the information available and the links between trustworthy individuals, something that simply threatens a government that lies on a daily basis.

Despite this, there are still strategies for resisting. Each difficulty is met by thousands or millions of people looking for more creative and challenging answers to keep in touch with others, to meet their informational needs and move on. Website locks end up being useless when people learn to change their DNS¹⁷ or use a VPN¹⁸ to surf the web. Social media have served to bring important issues to the public discussion agenda, as well as to get the innocent out of jail in the face of the State’s arbitrariness. However, one of the main challenges in Venezuela so we can continue resisting and strengthening the connected society has to do with recovering the ability to massively

16 *Fake news hunters: What is astroturfing.* <https://twitter.com/cazamosfake/news/status/1380924127062687748>

17 *How to change DNS.* <https://vesinfiltro.com/bloqueos/dns/>

18 *Bypass internet locks.* <http://vesinfiltro.com/bloqueos/>

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impact citizens, something that communicational hegemony has mutilated in many ways, as well as with acting as a coordinated swarm, in which everyone respects their specificities, talents and competences, but where everyone can work towards the same goal. Social networks alone cannot do that. They are simply private platforms that support the publication of content and live by inserting advertising. The real value lies in the users, their interactions, and the way they cultivate their relationships. What demonstrates the maturity of audiences, despite all the blows they receive from power, is that the process of learning can be collective, accelerated, decentralized, and can generate cognitive capital that only pushes forward. This means that people who know how to share a file or create a group or publish content will do so on WhatsApp or Signal, if they find out that it is more secure. They will do it on networks or mailing lists if they need more privacy. They will be active on Twitter or TikTok once they learn what's new in the format. That capital that resides in people who learn more each day is the true value of social media, because people are friends and will continue to make friends, contacts, accomplices and allies in any new, public or clandestine network that arises tomorrow. This is where the true powers of the people are, because they truly connect and make the net so strong that even in the midst of a power blackout, or a democratic void, it remains and continues to work. And the rest is just having fun.

Thoughts on the anthropological damage in Venezuela

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Sándor Marai dedicates the last pages of “Land, land!” to explain the reasons that led him into exile. They are intimate reflections that describe the agony of a soul that refuses to be invaded:

If I stayed... the secret technique of brainwashing, more dangerous than the annihilation of conscience carried out in prisons and torture cells, by physical or chemical means, would soon be applied to me: they would make me kill my opponent self. That was what they wanted. Their methods –the well-studied alternation of pampering and threatening, of contempt and cajoling– were effective: those who submit will one day end up losing their own vision of reality, their vision of their own destiny. There will come a time when they will not only be indifferent and deathly tired and desperately skeptical, there will even come a time when they will believe that everything is fine as it is. Freedom is not a permanent conscious state, but a constant desire for something, and brainwashing annihilates that desire in the consciousness of the victim; someone who has been “treated” like this will one day wake up without the will to be free (own translation)¹.

1 Sándor Marai, *Tierra, tierra* (Barcelona: Salamandra, 2016): 403-404.

What the Literature Nobel Prize laureate calls "brainwashing" can refer to what Dagoberto Valdés, a Cuban thinker, describes as what causes the essence of human people to weaken, become injured or break down². The subsequent absence of desire for freedom alludes to the central theme of this reflection: Anthropological damage. This article is an approach to the Venezuelan version of the phenomenon identified and studied by Valdés in Pinar del Río, Cuba. The ideas that I share include –and seek to reconcile– political experience and hours of study. This essay has three parts: (i) concept of anthropological damage, (ii) autocratic nature of the Chavista revolution, and (iii) challenges for the democratic transformation.

Anthropological damage: the transcendent and the contingent

Entiendo por daño antropológico

(...) The weakening, injury or breakdown of that which is essential to human people, their internal structure and their cognitive, emotional, volitional, ethical, social and spiritual dimensions, whether total or partial depending on the degree of disorder caused. It has arisen and has been established as a consequence of living long years under a regime in which the State and more specifically a single Party intends to embody the people, unambiguously orient the entire institutionality, interpret the meaning of history and maintain total control over society and citizens. In this way, it subverts life in truth, undermines freedom and violates the civic, political, economic,

2 Dagoberto Valdés, "Causas, síntomas y consecuencias del daño antropológico provocado por los regímenes totalitarios", *Democratización* 7 (Marzo 2020): 5. <https://redformaweb.com/articulos-septima-edicion/>

cultural and religious rights and duties of people, which deeply hurts their intrinsic dignity as it provokes a passive adaptation of citizens to the environment and a persistent social anomie (own translation)³.

This definition reflects the impact of more than sixty years of totalitarianism in Cuba and has an outstanding political and intellectual value. It includes human experience and theoretical depth. For me, as a Venezuelan, it has been a true discovery. The “symptoms” identified by the author are a mirror in which we can see ourselves looking back. This otherness is compassion and hope at the same time. On the one hand, I share and make my own the pain of those who precede us in the fight for freedom of conscience. And on the other, I confirm the universality of human nature that opts for the same old paths whenever it feels threatened.

The term comprehends three parts: what the phenomenon is, its causes, and its consequences. It is convenient to distinguish which of these aspects are transcendent and which are contingent. In other words, *what specifically refers to the Cuban case and what can transcend other experiences*. It is not a simple exercise and I do not intend to exhaust the topic on this opportunity. However, this distinction will allow us to accurately approach the case at hand: the Venezuelan case.

The first part of Valdés's concept refers to the “what”: “weakening, injury or breakdown of that which is essential to human people”. It could be said that it enters the realm of the transcendent. That is, in those places that have endured totalitarian regimes, some type of degeneration of the human condition can be observed. However, as the author mentions, the dimensions

3 Valdés, “Causas, síntomas...”, 5.

of this decline depend on aspects of each reality: longevity of the autocracy, levels of domination, economy, tradition and political culture, among others.

The second part of the concept specifies the causes that produce the phenomenon on the island. The author identifies twenty events that have hurt Cubans –and still do–, which include: enthronement of the official ideology as a secular religion, indoctrination through the educational system, using all the media for propaganda, imposing a sole party, repression, control of the economy, family disintegration, dismantling of civil society, organization of a structure of denunciation, among others.

The author goes on to list fourteen symptoms and consequences. I transcribe *in extenso*:

1. The incoherence between what is said, thought, felt and done;
2. Depersonalization and massification processes;
3. Prevalence of moral relativism, and what the author calls “unconscious Machiavellianism”, since “anything goes as long as I save myself or my family, causing difficulties in ethical education”;
4. Ethical and civic illiteracy;
5. Lack of a life project;
6. The numbing of critical consciousness;
7. The affectation or blocking of political life;
8. Fear, but without identification of cause;
9. The legal defenselessness of citizens;

10. Distrust and paranoia;
11. Lack of religious freedom;
12. Ignorance or reinterpretation of history;
13. Political and moral Manichaeism;
14. Upsetting Cuba's role in the world, portraying it as a victim.

This shows a system of domination that seeks to take over the being and doing of the human person. It describes the context that has been configured in Cuba after six decades of totalitarianism. As I recognize the uniqueness of each case, I wonder about the drift of totalitarian ambitions in Venezuelan territory. How and how deep are the wounds that twenty years of the Chavista revolution have opened. In this sense, I identify that one of our most important political and intellectual challenges is to know and understand the extent of our trauma.

Autocratic nature of the Chavista revolution

To learn about the anthropological damage in Venezuela, it is convenient to delve into the autocratic nature of the Chavista revolution. This exercise is necessary for two reasons: (i) there is a relationship between the undemocratic type and the possible type of political change that can be achieved⁴, and (ii) the devastation caused is related to the autocratic nature of the system that we wish to depose. This effort, far from responding to a mere intellectual curiosity, is a necessary –and demanding– political task.

The Chavista revolution is a non-democratic system that has developed its own characteristics that feed each other and allow

4 Samuel Huntington (1994) *La tercera ola: la democratización a finales del S.XX*. Madrid: Ediciones Paidós.

it to severely limit individual freedoms. In *"Autocracias del S.XXI: caso Venezuela"*⁵ we consider each one of them and, for the purposes of this article, I will briefly summarize them. The autocracy that has been installed in Venezuela is configured as follows:

1. **Graduality:** The Chavista revolution came to power via elections in 1999. It was leveraged in a deep process of democratic erosion that allowed it to gather wills and reach power⁶. Its main electoral promise in 1998 was the dismantling of representative democracy from a National Constituent Assembly not contemplated in the 1961 Constitution. From that moment on, its autocratic advance has been stable and gradual for more than two decades⁷.
2. **Resilience:** The gradual expansion of the Chavista revolution shows that it is a system capable of extracting autocratic learning from each crisis that it overcomes. Matheus accurately describes how the system has concrete tools to overcome "states of need" that test its dominance and affirms that autocratic resilience is the power to create antibodies against democratizing forces⁸.

5 Paola Bautista de Alemán, *Autocracies of the 21st century: the Venezuelan case, "Autocracias del S.XXI: caso Venezuela"* (Madrid: Dahbar Editores, 2020).

6 I recommend reviewing the speech given by Luis Castro Leiva in the late Congress of the Republic on January 23, 1999. His words reflect the context that set the stage for Hugo Chávez Frías to come to power. Read in: <https://prodavinci.com/el-discurso-de-luis-castro-leiva-sobre-el-23-de-enero-de-1958/>

7 I recommend reading Juan Miguel Matheus's "Desmantelamiento gradual del Estado de Derecho" in *Autocracias del S.XXI: caso Venezuela* (Bautista de Alemán, 2020).

8 Juan Miguel Matheus, "Configuración ideológica de la Revolución Bolivariana" en *Autocracias del S.XX: Caso Venezuela*, coord. Paola Bautista de Alemán (Madrid: Editorial Dahbar, 2020): 128.

3. **Ideology:** The Chavista revolution defines itself as the left and promotes “socialism of the 21st century”. In addition to self-definition, there is evidence of ideological, operational and practical closeness with the autocracies of the world: Cuba, China, Iran, Turkey and North Korea. Authors who have studied this topic⁹ wonder about the relationship between Marxist rhetoric, its existential translation and its capacity for real implementation. These intellectual and political concerns do not detract from the ideological component of the system¹⁰.
4. **Autocratic solidarity:** The relationship that the Chavista revolution has managed to build with the main autocracies in the world (Cuba, China, Turkey, Iran and North Korea) offers it tools of resilience that allow it to stay in power¹¹. This support is expressed in mechanisms to overcome blockades and measures to which the democratic world turns in order to weaken the regime.
5. **Gangster state:** The Chavista revolution gradually dismantled the democratic and liberal state that was

9 Matheus, “Configuración...”. Guillermo Aveledo, *Los fundamentos ideológicos del sistema político chavista*, Universidad Metropolitana (2019). En: https://www.academia.edu/31725052/Los_Fundamentos_Ideol%C3%B3gicos_del_Sistema_Pol%C3%ADtico_Chavista

10 Tzvetan Todorov in *La experiencia totalitaria* reflects on totalitarian ideology and life in communism. He explains that the purpose is to conquer and retain power, and the (eventual) means, the nice ideological construction is reduced to a pure more or less comfortable form. The bottom line is to appropriate power. Tzvetan Todorov, *La experiencia totalitaria* (México: Galaxia de Gutenberg, 2014): 27. He highlights the importance of ideology and its instrumental character.

11 I recommend reading the studies that Professor Elsa Cardozo has published on the matter.

inaugurated in Puntofijo¹². This process deepened the institutional weakness inherited from the Civil Republic and led to the creation of criminal networks from the official instances of the Venezuelan State, all aiming to cling to power. It is what I have called “an entropic gangster state”¹³. This configuration of official spaces has led to a failed state, novel in autocratic terms and especially difficult to deal with.

6. The Military component: The support of the National Armed Forces is a key element for this analysis. As Pedro Pablo Peñaloza expresses it, the Chavista revolution is supported by bayonets¹⁴. However, and even recognizing the significance of the military variable, I must clarify that it is not a traditional military dictatorship.

7. Repressive system and systematic violation of human rights: The report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission published in September 2020 revealed the systematic nature of the violation of human rights in Venezuela. They are not isolated events or particular initiatives of specific officials. It is a misdirected structure from the high government with the purpose of seriously limiting our rights.

These seven components make up a **totalitarian setting**¹⁵ where the conscience of Venezuelans is sought to be dominated

12 Juan Miguel Matheus, “Configuración ideológica de la Revolución Bolivariana” en *Autocracias del S.XX: Caso Venezuela*, coord. Paola Bautista de Alemán (Madrid: Editorial Dahbar, 2020).

13 Paola Bautista de Alemán, *Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela* (Madrid: Dahbar Editores, 2020).

14 Bautista de Alemán, *Autocracias...*

15 Francisco Plaza promptly warned in academic and political spaces about the totalitarian vocation of the Chavista revolution and the dangers of its

and our human condition is deeply affected. For this reason, it is not surprising that the symptoms listed by Valdés regarding the Cuban case are familiar to us. For the purposes of this article, I will pause briefly on three aspects that I have identified –and experienced– in Venezuelan daily life and I consider a priority because they can affect our capacities for internal democratic struggle. It is not an exhaustive description. It is a starting point that seeks to encourage personal reflection and future analysis.

1. **Fear, distrust and paranoia:** Svetlana Aleksievich explains in *El fin del homo sovieticus*¹⁶ why the Soviets got used to talking about political issues in the kitchen. They considered that this was the safest place. There, they were far from telephones –each earpiece was believed to have a microphone– and isolated from neighbors¹⁷. Time has gone by, the USSR has dissolved... and yet the Russians still discuss issues in front of the stove. Fear, distrust and paranoia shape culture, attitudes and modes of socialization. These three components have advanced in the country as human barriers that hinder the democratic struggle. A first stage of this reality is the disappearance of “politics” in private spaces. Here is an example: A few years ago –not so many– it was usual for WhatsApp groups of neighbors, schools, families or friends to circulate

autocratic drift. It is convenient to read *El silencio de la democracia* (“The silence of democracy”) and other of his pieces on the subject (Caracas: Los libros de El Nacional, 2011). With theoretical clarity and scientific rigor, he was able to warn against the risks of Hugo Chávez's proposal. Years later, during the 2014 mobilizations, the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference issued a statement in which it denounced the intention of the official party to implement its plan while hiding its totalitarian nature. See: http://w2.ucab.edu.ve/tl_files/noticias/ComunicadoCEV02-04-2014.pdf

16 “The end of homo sovieticus”.

17 Svetlana Aleksievich, *El fin del homo sovieticus* (Madrid: Acantilado, 2015).

political information that gave rise to internal debates and promoted the democratic struggle. This practice has slowly disappeared. It rarely happens now. Not only is silence predominant, but in some cases it is even requested for political information to not circulate or opinions of this type to not be expressed. Along with the natural boredom and exhaustion after so many years of struggle, I perceive fear. Expressions such as “You never know who’s in that group chat” or “There might be a cooperating patriot” begin to pop in our heads. The disappearance of politics has consequences. On the one hand, the public space is emptied. The democratic struggle is made invisible and there is a sort of citizenship desert in which those of us who suffer begin to understand we are alone and unable to escape the tragedy. On the other hand, we deprive ourselves of the experience of debating our ideas, of listening to one another, of differing without fear, of recognizing the good in those who think differently, of the importance of building consensus. By eradicating politics from public and private spaces, we cancel the citizenship school that is built in everyday life. In short: we close ourselves off and become less human.

- 2. Blockade of political life:** In Venezuela, material and human obstacles have been set up for the development of political life. By material obstacles I mean limitations of an economic nature. Poverty can engulf us, restrict our social dimension and limit the time we spend in the public sphere. Politics, in this environment of misery, must be transformed into a deeply human exercise that lifts those who suffer from the suffocation of need out of the abyss of pain. It is not an easy task. It is demanding... And by human obstacles I mean the difficulty of building real political

representation. The concept of representation is perhaps one of the most complex terms in political philosophy¹⁸. What makes people identify with someone else and wish to follow them in specific endeavours? The inability to create representation is a terrible injury that affects pre-democratic conditions. Studies show that those societies that have managed to advance towards democracy without strong political parties and/or robust civil society have tended to fail¹⁹. The totalitarian environment that has been

18 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introductory Essay* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952).

19 Francis Fukuyama analyzed the Arab Spring. The question that guided him was related to the democratic inauguration processes that failed after the autocratic liberations. He stopped to consider what is known as "pre-democratic conditions". That is to say, the political, social and economic circumstances that existed in these countries and that allowed them to advance –or not– towards a democracy. Referring to the case of Tunisia he wrote: "Creating a viable democracy, however, requires two further stages during which the initial mobilization against tyranny gets institutionalized and converted into durable practices. The first is the organization of social movements into political parties that can contest elections. Civil society organizations usually focus on narrow issues, and are not set up to mobilize voters –this is the unique domain of political parties. The failure to build political parties explains why more liberal forces have frequently failed at the ballot box in transitional countries from Russia to Ukraine to Egypt. The second required stage, however, concerns state-building and state capacity. Once a democratic government is in power, it must actually govern –that is, it must exercise legitimate authority and provide basic services to the population. The democracy-promotion community has paid much less attention to the problems of democratic governance than it has to the initial mobilization and the transition. Without the ability to govern well, however, new democracies will disappoint the expectations of their followers and delegitimize themselves. Indeed, as US history shows, democratization without attention to state modernization can actually lead to a weakening of the quality of government". Francis Fukuyama, "Why is democracy performing so poorly", *Journal of Democracy* 26, 1 (2015): 11-20. The Johns

configured in the country has raised barriers that hinder the exercise of politics.

- 3. Lack of a life project:** Perhaps one of the worst human mortifications is the lack of future prospects. Perceiving that a higher power has the ability to arbitrarily amputate possibilities for personal and social growth can be devastating. Twenty years of Chavismo have led the country to collapse. The educational system –at all levels– is destroyed²⁰, and the context offers few possibilities. Many of us can find it difficult to look forward to the future. This situation can lead us to radically live the present without greater satisfaction. The mutilation of the future has personal and social consequences. Individually, people develop personalities with serious limitations for managing freedom responsibly. Those who have not been free will hardly know how to be responsible²¹. And in the social sphere, a “save yourself if you can” logic is set up as the order of the day. The lack of a life project is a breeding ground for the fragmentation of efforts and is an individual

Hopkins University Press. Recuperado el 13 de octubre de 2017, desde Project MUSE database. (2015): 19.

20 The monthly salary of a Venezuelan teacher is less than USD\$2. Although there are no official data from the Ministry of Education, I highly recommend reviewing ENCOVI's report regarding living conditions to expand this information.

21 “Land, land!”, Sandor Marai's biography cited at the beginning of this essay, ends with the beginning of the exile. Marai narrates what he felt when he crossed the border knowing that he could not return and with the hidden illusion of wanting to return: “The night was calm and silent. The train left without making a sound. In a few moments we left the bridge behind and continued traveling under the starry sky to a world where no one was waiting for us. At that moment –for the first time in my life– I really felt fear. I understood that I was free. I started to feel scared”. (Own translation). Sandor Marai, *Tierra, tierra* (Barcelona: Salamandra, 2016).

trait that has a hard impact on the ability to create common plans and visions.

Challenges for democratic transformation

In the previous sections, I exposed the concept of anthropological damage, I offered an approach to the autocratic nature of the Chavista revolution and I specified three ideas that seek to open doors to reflection. In this final section I will dwell on two proposals that seek to alleviate the symptoms of anthropological damage that I identify in the reality of our country: Build spaces for citizenship and vindicate politics.

- 1. Build spaces for citizenship:** The Chavista revolution has created an environment that hinders the exercise of our citizenship. Fear, distrust, paranoia and material misery can limit our social dimension, affecting the capacities to fight and the pre-democratic conditions. My biggest concern in the face of this reality is its cultural impact. I wonder how this mutilation will affect our political culture and our modes of socialization. Along with this question, I identify different types of relief: those that we can offer while the revolution is in power and those that we will have to develop once we advance in a real process of democratization. In this section I will refer to the former. The construction of spaces for citizenship can help resist the totalitarian advance in the inner world of people and alleviate its immediate symptoms. "Spaces for citizenship" is meant as those instances that offer tools, knowledge and dialogue that allow to experience the exercise of democratic values. In this sense, the contents must be aimed at strengthening the sense of democratic struggle and the human virtues that allow us to resist hostilities in

the environment²². Specifically, these spaces are political parties, universities, unions, guilds, non-governmental organizations, among others.

2. Vindicate politics: Chavismo came to power as a consequence of the serious process of democratic erosion that our political system suffered at the end of the 20th century²³. If we analyze the rise of the Chavista revolution from today's political and intellectual perspective, we could say that Hugo Chávez led the first undemocratic populism of the 21st century. Anti-politics paved the way for the revolution²⁴. In this sense, the recovery of democracy must necessarily go through a process of vindicating politics. With "vindication", I refer to the claim to the realization or authorship of a specific action. I believe that politics –understood as a joint and community task–, leveraged on honest witnesses and sustained work, must assume the task of liberating and healing the country. In this sense, our reality requires us to assume public delivery with special generosity:

22 I recommend reading "Centros de pensamiento en América Latina" in "Diálogo Político" (November, 2020) in: <https://revista.dialogopolitico.org/>

23 I recommend reading four speeches that describe this process: the last public address by Rómulo Betancourt in 1981, the two speeches by Rafael Caldera in Congress on February 27, 1989 and February 4, 1992, and the speech by Luis Castro Leiva on January 23, 1999.

24 In the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis explains: "The complaint that "everything is broken" is answered by the claim that "it can't be fixed", or "what can I do?" This feeds into disillusionment and despair, and hardly encourages a spirit of solidarity and generosity. Plunging people into despair closes a perfectly perverse circle: such is the agenda of the invisible dictatorship of hidden interests that have gained mastery over both resources and the possibility of thinking and expressing opinions." Francisco, *Carta Encíclica Fratelli Tutti* (2020): 75.

All this can help us realize that what is important is not constantly achieving great results, since these are not always possible. In political activity, we should remember that, “appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love. Consequently, if I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life (...) Those who love, and who no longer view politics merely as a quest for power, “may be sure that none of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for others. No single act of love for God will be lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted. All of these encircle our world like a vital force²⁵.

25 Francisco, *Carta Encíclica Fratelli Tutti* (2020): 195.

Mariela Ramírez:
**“It is necessary to rise
above violence, wounds
and resentments to
imagine ourselves in
a network of relationships
that includes us all”**

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

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

Mariela Ramírez: "It is necessary to rise above violence, wounds and resentments to imagine ourselves in a network of relationships that includes us all"

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

Mariela Ramírez: "It is necessary to rise above violence, wounds and resentments to imagine ourselves in a network of relationships that includes us all"

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.

Mariela Ramírez: "It is necessary to rise above violence, wounds and resentments to imagine ourselves in a network of relationships that includes us all"

–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.

Mariela Ramírez: "It is necessary to rise above violence, wounds and resentments to imagine ourselves in a network of relationships that includes us all"

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

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