

Democratization



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The expression of an old longing

The political and administrative centralization that consolidated the country since the first third of the 20th century was not only intended to serve as a response to the dislocations suffered during the previous century, but would also be backed by the important ideological support of Positivism. On the one hand, this whole process explains the meaning of the emergence of the modern National State, while on the other, it explains the fact that costs and debts resulted, as would be the damage to a series of legitimate regional aspirations. Hence, seen as it may be seen, it was assumed that the national disintegration experienced until then had had its origin in unresolved historical conflicts, and that the most advisable response was, therefore, the construction of a centralized modern State.

Could the configuration of the Venezuelan State have been different during the 20th century? It is difficult to know, or giving free rein to such a question could only lead to counterfactual and therefore irresponsible speculation. The truth of the matter is that this happened, and this was not necessarily the work of simple willfulness, or providential inspiration, but rather the result of the implementation of a series of policies capable of ensuring a certain durability, which were also effective in the face of the recurrent

idea of the dispersion of authority as a synonym of disorder. If something is clear then, it is that this modern National State annulled the regionalist predominance that had distinguished other processes of political change that had taken place during almost a full century of republican life.

It is, however, possible to formulate one or even two observations from this point. Right at the start one might think, based on what has been said above, that if this modern State was erected as an alternative to dispersion and violence, then a professional and effective national army was the main –and perhaps single– mechanism it could count on to consolidate that centralizing dynamic. This may be largely true except it leaves out a relevant factor. Although the modern Venezuelan State resorted to the power (or to the mere threat) of the newest armed institution as a form of response to the violence commonly assumed as the main instrument of political combat, it would also have to take responsibility, at different moments of its journey during the 20th century, to stimulate the formation of a society capable of cultivating the values of peaceful coexistence.

So, beyond the fact that they had the military readiness and the professionalization of the armed institution to exercise coercion in such a way that any challenge to their authority would be asymmetrical, the State was still capable of integrating the nation through different mechanisms and not necessarily, or in all cases, based on the use (or threat) of violence. We would now have to speak of what the institutional and legal effort that the modern State also made to cement that very idea of belonging to a much more complex reality beyond regional allegiances.

The second thing to note is the following. In general, we usually take for granted that the modern State, as it came to be

known during the 20th century, was the product of the type of management promoted by Gomecism and the cast of positivist ideologues that supported the centralizing project of the national authority. That is not up for debate. Suffice it to point out that the fundamental premise around which that Positivism acted, which was much more somber and stark in its appraisals of social and political reality than the type of Positivism that had preceded it at the end of the 19th century, was that any distribution of power was equivalent, plain and simple, to the dispersion of authority. And these positivists associated with Gomecism did not appeal to a better voice than to the voice of Bolívar and to what he had pointed out regarding what was supposed to be the distribution of power, either in the form of plural executives or federal government schemes, as synonymous with chaos or weakness. What does, on the other hand, tend to go unnoticed (or, at least, is not something around which the necessary emphasis is made) is that, although that modern State was expanding its contents as a planner and regulator of the economy, or as a provider of social, educational, health and cultural services, almost in no case did it intend to abandon its centralizing vocation of authority.

This could be a sort of equivalent to the disappearance of Gómez and Gomecism from the scene, that type of State with highly centralized authority only tried to retrace its steps very late in the 20th century. And, when such was the case, it did so without failing to encounter enormous reluctance and even the presence of very influential voices (e.g. Rafael Caldera, or historic leaders of Democratic Action such as Gonzalo Barrios) who still advised that this State continued to act on the basis of a firmly sustained centralizing trajectory. This means, in other words, that the decentralization attempt that was implemented starting

in the 1990s would not be without a proper legion of opponents and dissatisfied.

Beyond the implications of a type of positivist-rooted thought associated with Gomecism, we should note that, as of 1936, great caution, distrust and fears persisted about what a different type of power distribution could mean. So much so that even when the best time came for the expansion of citizen privileges or the consolidation of the State's guarantee and assistance vocation, after the events of October 18, 1945, these precautions continued to be remarkably present.

It would be convenient to mention an example that is quite revealing when talking about this. In 1947, at the time when the Constituent National Assembly debated the incorporation of the figure of the President of the Republic as a directly and universally elected authority, that same project provided that state governors would continue to be appointed by the National Executive, as per the practice until then. This provoked perhaps one of the richest and most controversial debates among those that took place between the ruling party and some opposition representatives. We speak, for example, of the opinion of the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (despite the fact that, in numbers, they were a frank minority) or, even, that of some independent deputies close to Acción Democrática. In both cases, communists and independents would highlight the notable contradiction that, in their opinion, was revealed by the fact that Venezuelans had the right to choose, for the first time, the President of the Republic directly and universally, but not so their regional authorities.

However, given the official insistence according to which the revolutionary regime, being provisional and fragile, could not run the risk of being at the mercy of resurrected chiefdoms, the result

of such a debate was to let the future take charge of resolving such a knot. Such a thing did not happen of course, since, firstly, sooner rather than later came the shipwreck of that attempt at democratic construction and then came the viscous interlude of the military decade between 1948 and 1958.

As of 1959, that is, when the time had come to reinstate a competitive electoral culture and to assume the democratic fact as a binding expression of the whole society, the issue of a more balanced power distribution (and, thus, that of the direct election of the highest regional authorities) would re-emerge among the many pending claims. However, it could not be said that the precautions, whose origins went back to positivist mistrust, had not yet subdued. So much so that, despite the fact that there was already a strategic action of unity between the different political forces (as had not happened during the period 1945-1948), the idea that democracy was not a consolidated fact and that trust in the future looked still relative.

Hence, even when what the deconcentration of power could mean in times of new expectations was handled with respect, the Delegate Commission that was in charge of drafting the Constitution that would be sanctioned in 1961 (since there was not, in this case, a Constituent Assembly) resolved to let the issue be left to the future once again. In any case, the difference was that this time it was done through the adoption of a nebulous transitional arrangement; but the certain fact is that the drafters of that Constitution did not fail to exhibit their deep reticence towards Federalism.

Of course, none of this prevented the implementation of processes and policies leading to greater local and regional participation during the second half of the 20th century or, in any

case, serving to revitalize or reinvigorate the economic dynamics of the different areas of the country. This is demonstrated by the creation of administrative regions or regional corporations (e.g. *Corpozulia* or *Corporiente*), as well as the stimulus that was offered by the State in favor of the creation of regional universities, or to promote the establishment of regional broadcasters, television stations or mass consumption press as a way to abolish the privilege held until then by the capital of the republic regarding knowledge of national problems and, also, to guarantee the simultaneity of information. That is why it would not be convenient to speak of the annulment or total suffocation of regional aspirations. But the truth is that the choice of its authorities would be another matter. Thus, the direct election of governors (and, by extension, at the local level, of mayors) would once again be relegated to a pending assignment.

With ups and downs, or between shortcomings and achievements, a forty-year period passed between 1959 and 1989 that ended up revealing two relevant things simultaneously: we are talking, on the one hand, about the increasingly complex level reached by that modern State and, as a harsh paradox, its increasingly lower capacity to offer answers given the incidence produced by demographic growth (that is, by a population quadrupling in less than half a century) on the provision of public services. We then talked about what the challenge of continuing to honor its commitments and obligations at the level of social demands generated up to that time would mean for the State. But we are also talking, on the other hand, about the development of a much more demanding society than the one that could have existed during the first half of the 20th century.

In other words: as it became more complex in its roles and attributions, or as it became more difficult for it to satisfy

demands, that same centralized State had to deal with a society that not only became more pluralized but also more sophisticated in terms of their expectations and claims. Such claims, which would also become more peremptory, included a return to the desire for what should be a greater sincerity of power, especially considering that the country had conjured up the fears that had existed around the weakening of national authority by having already reached a point of institutional maturity (and even national sense) to visualize, sans complexes or traumas, the need to confront centralist preventions, which were not only part of a heavy heritage from *Gomecism* times but were shared by the founding members of the democratic essay.

This then led (amid forty years of successes and failures, as has been said) to the need to provide the model of democratic coexistence with new centers of gravitation based on a process of political reforms. For this, there would be a list of recommendations, as a roadmap, formulated since 1984 by the *Comisión para la Reforma del Estado* (COPRE) which would be difficult not to qualify as the most intelligent way (even though it may have come late and, therefore, too fast) that could be conceived in terms of self-correction of the course followed since 1959.

In the first place, this clarifies that what was intended was to oxygenate the political system, something that took a lot of effort to consolidate, i.e. the democratic national project. Second, by conceiving it as a self-correcting essay, this meant that Venezuelan democracy did not intend to choose the path of suicide. And no less important, in third place, is that if there was talk of “oxygenating” the system (by way of dismantling many of the prerogatives held until then by the State, improving the efficiency of the tax system, the transparency of the financing mechanisms of political parties, or the reform of the Suffrage Law, just to name a few), this also

presupposed “oxygenating” regional expectations after the long dynamic that political and administrative centralization implied as a basic requirement of the construction of the modern state in the 20th century. The process, as is well known, not only led to autonomy of action being transferred to the regions, but also gave rise to new centers of legitimation, redistribution, and pluralization of power through the direct election of mayors and governors.

Now, it can be said that, as a result of this process, the same thing happened with regard to social investment and, even more so, with regard to the weight of some non-visible works such as the provision of drinking water, environmental sanitation, or the construction of a huge sewage system: the democratic regime simply did not know, or was not even interested in promoting its achievements. They just took them for granted. And, among such achievements, was what was done by COPRE. But the important thing in any case was that the reform took place and that chaos did not come, nor did the ghosts of the past for the simple reason that the democratic system already exhibited the necessary robustness and muscle for such a path to be followed. After all, the democratic regime could boast of having consolidated stability by defeating armed movements and insurgencies of all kinds during the 1960s; but already, from the following decade, faced with a “pacified” country, it was difficult to accept that the requirement of stability continued to close many avenues to the requirement of participation. And this parameter had to continue in force until the “reformist democrats” decided to challenge the “traditionalist democrats” around what they considered should be an *aggiornamento* of the model.

Which also means that, in the face of the list of demands made by a society increasingly critical of the democratic course,

the doomsayers that responded to the sensitivities of the past had to remain planted in their place after the reception that, at the collective, seemed to have COPRE as a self-correcting mechanism.

Certainly, decentralization was not perfect, nor did it claim to be, since it did not include some things that were also aspired to, such as the idea of fiscal federalism; but, in any case, there were many powers that, from then on, ended up acting directly at the hands of regional authorities. Moreover, the relevance of this effort to decongest and open up new spaces for local action should be highlighted. We refer to the fact that this process also allowed for such regional authorities, by carving out their own leadership and showing an efficient balance in their management, aspiring to project themselves as valid options at the time of the presidential elections.

Even more, after implementing such reforms, the coexistence between the central government and the regions did not manifest as a traumatic experience, rather it was the opposite. There was no dispersal of authority, no chaos, no civil war. So much so that President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had to debut before that experience during his second administration, interacted in terms of enormous fluidity with regional authorities that were not only expressions opposed to his party but also had reservations or discrepancies in relation to some of the objectives of the reform recommended by COPRE, which were aimed more at the economic sphere. Pérez respected and accepted that dynamic; the same was to happen during the interim presidency of Ramón J. Velásquez, as well as during the second presidency of Rafael Caldera, despite the enormous reservations that the latter expressed during the 1980s when COPRE launched an astonishingly broad process of consultations at the national level. In any case, and despite the fact that their efforts ended up being criticized in other ways,

the three presidents knew how to interpret what could entail the emergence of authentic regional leaderships for the health of democratic dynamics.

The past as a project

“The past as a project” is an expression that the historian Tomás Straka has used with great skill to refer to different expressions associated with the way in which the so-called Bolivarian Revolution has tried to trace out a confused (and perhaps not so much) future since it came into existence as political alternative in 1999. Among these expressions is precisely the fact of having dusted off the old Bolivarian (and positivist) precautions regarding the nature of authority and, if you will, to insist that the guarantee and efficiency of that authority resides in everything that can be done in favor of re-centralizing it, regardless of the fact that it has had to resort to new wineskins to store old wines to that end. We thus speak of front instruments, such as “the Communal State”, or of formulas loaded with pure sensationalism, such as that of “the new geometry of power”, which have supposedly sought to redefine decentralization while actually aggravating centralism.

The worst thing is that, like many of the most radical changes implemented by the Bolivarian Revolution, this one has gone against what is strictly provided for in the 1999 Constitution with regard to the preservation, and even the expansion of the decentralizing dynamic initiated a decade earlier. It is not in vain that there are those who observe that the current Constitution allowed the furthering of decentralization, especially with regard to the autonomy of the municipalities and, specifically, in relation to the transfer of powers by the National Power.

However, as the lawyer and professor José Ignacio Hernández has pointed out, the communal State was conceived to weaken that State (named in the 1999 Constitution as the “decentralized federal State”) through a skillful manipulation of language. He synthesizes the process in this way: “Thus, the communal State maintains decentralization, but changing its content. This no longer consists of the transfer of powers from the National Power to states and municipalities, but in the transfer of powers to the instances of People’s Power through (...) the Federal Council of Government. Since the instances of People’s Power depend, directly or indirectly, on the National Government, which in turn dominates the Federal Council of Government, this redefinition of the concept of decentralization (...) reinforced, therefore, the powers of the President of the Republic” [Own translation]. In other words; checkmate on the governments and municipalities, as they had existed until then, constitutionally speaking.

Apart from the aforementioned author, the historian Catalina Banko, the university professor Carlos Mascareño, and the researcher Rosangel Álvarez have offered a series of views, from critical and professional reflection, about the scope of this centralizing escalation promoted by the Bolivarian Revolution. So, in addition to being a literature of enormous quality, it is easily available and, therefore, it would be unnecessary to gloss it for the purposes of these pages. What could be said by way of closing before a confused and discouraged country is that, seen from a historical perspective, the result of such reforms was the configuration of a much more diverse political map, causing the achievements of a certain redistribution of power to endure, until a not so remote past, while revealing the gestation and emergence of new leaderships.

Perhaps there are no great works in sight as a result of the decentralization practiced for just over a decade; but this is due to the fact that this experience did not last long, and perhaps it is also due to the fact that not all the scope that was planned was recorded. But, even so, I prefer to bet in favor of the decentralizing desire for the simple reason that perhaps it will be possible to return to that path once we can leave behind the actions of this State model which, although it may continue to be authoritarian in its conduct, reflexes and practices, has come to reveal, in the end, a huge loss of control.

Recommended readings

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