

Democratization



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Amid the turmoil that rattles the Venezuelan spirit, the psychologist, professor, and celebrated writer urges us to resist pessimism, highlights the value of communal life, and reminds us that “nothing is entirely stable or permanent.”

—In a conversation about the country's situation, a colleague from the state of Táchira asks: Will we always live like this? What would you answer?

I would say that I cannot answer with a simple yes or no, and I would add that measuring time in terms of our personal lives is different from measuring it in historical terms. For many people, the country's situation has become the only measure of time, but even so, it is necessary to understand the circumstances in perspective.

I know what I say is not consolation, but I try to weigh the circumstances and know a bit of history —ours and that of other countries. That helps to understand that nothing is completely stable or permanent, neither the good nor the bad. To give a few

examples, I had always thought that the United States' democratic system was untouchable, and now I am beginning to doubt it because there are signs that it is being undermined. Conversely, countries that endured long dictatorships, such as Spain and Portugal, have established democratic systems that have proven quite resilient.

–Faced with a crisis like the one Venezuela is experiencing, the temptation of “every man for himself” always arises, with each person retreating into their own bubble to try to survive. How can we revive community life and shared values to address the challenges posed by the government?

I understand that for some people isolation may be a way to protect themselves, but in my opinion, it is a mistake. Precisely in moments of crisis is when we need others the most. In times of hardship, we need the bonds that connect us in solidarity. For that, it is not necessary to surround oneself with many people, but instead with those with whom we share values, memories, and affections.

I know this is challenging, especially since community life has been disrupted by the diaspora that fractured family, friendship, professional, and neighborhood networks, but it is not impossible. It requires the will to weave strategies and ensure that bonds are not lost, even creating new ones with people who enter our lives for different reasons.

–Perhaps more as a caricature than a portrait, the Venezuelan is described as a permanently happy, smiling, optimistic being. But now, clearly, the soul of the Venezuelan is pierced by rage, pain, pessimism, and above all, fear.

How can these two sides be reconciled, and how can one navigate these emotions to keep moving forward?

Certainly, Venezuelans often have a lighthearted way of understanding circumstances, but to assume that we are always happy and optimistic is a big leap. I don't know when this image was created, which distorts us and does not represent us properly. It probably merged an image of Caribbean sun and musical joy, which may sometimes exist, but obviously not always, and which is more an accepted and publicized image than a reality.

Rage, pain, and pessimism are common human emotions that are also present in us. Reconciling them with others of a different kind is a properly human task: knowing when to laugh and when to cry, when to fear and when to trust, when to be happy and when to suffer. It does not benefit us to think that we were once happy and optimistic, only to find ourselves in the opposite state now, as it can lead to pessimism. The challenge is to be able to find, even in unhappy situations, the moments that bring us joy.

–The country that aspired to a gradual transition now finds itself plunging toward the opposite extreme. Experts report that censorship is increasing, while the government forces citizens to accept and repeat its narrative under threat of severe punishment. How can one resist and cling to the truth amid this scenario?

This was many years ago, but I still remember a conversation with a woman who had been born and spent most of her life under a totalitarian regime. She was an educated person, spoke several languages, and had extensive historical and artistic knowledge about her city, Riga –the capital of Latvia. She earned a living teaching it to tourists. Someone asked her what life had been like

behind closed doors, when it was essential that her family and she herself followed the steps of a Soviet education. Her answer was roughly this: "My family was always in opposition. I was educated in a Soviet republic, so I learned very well the value of silence, but Sovietization was something outward-facing. At home, we were not communists."

I thought I could hear in her words the pulse of resentment that persists when so much humiliation has been suffered, so many insults endured, so many people killed, and at the same time the pride of having resisted.

–The discourse that constantly appeals for help from the international community is growing. Has it been proven that we Venezuelans are incapable of solving the problems we ourselves created?

Once again, I appeal to the historical perspective on events. Which country has resolved its crises without the cooperation of others? I cite a few examples: In World War II, the alliances between democratic countries were key to defeating the Axis of Nazism and Fascism. The democratization of European countries that remained under Soviet rule for more than forty years was not exclusively an internal struggle, but also relied on the help of other countries. Even closer to home, Bolívar asked President Pétion of Haiti for help to organize expeditions, sent diplomatic missions to the United States and Great Britain, received financial aid from the Sephardic colony in Curaçao, and benefited from the participation of foreign soldiers in the War of Independence.

International aid is not a demonstration of incapacity, but a resource that has been used from ancient times to the present all over the world. To think that needing help to solve problems

—political or of any other kind— is a sign of weakness is both a naive and, at the same time, arrogant way of seeing things.

—In Venezuela, people are always looking for a savior —with the hope of restarting history and reaching that elusive bright future. Has the time come to give up on that idea and understand that there will be no easy or quick way out of our drama??

There are never easy and quick solutions for serious and complicated problems; by now, that seems obvious. On the other hand, the idea of salvation is a messianic idea —the hope that someone will come to save us is deeply rooted in humanity, and not only in Venezuela, although among us, the utopia of restarting history in search of a bright future is an illusion that dates back to Bolivarian times and has been spurred at different moments in contemporary history.

History, like life, cannot be restarted; it can only continue, trying to build on the good that has been left behind and to correct the bad that persists. Reconstruction is arduous work, with bright and dark moments, with advances and setbacks. It benefits from capable and committed leaders, but it is built through collective effort. That is why what we saw earlier is important: preserving bonds with those who share our values.

Stimulating Nuance is Stimulating Thought

Héctor Torres

Before February 2004, there was no Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter —each launched about a year apart, starting then. In twenty years, these three megacorporations have changed the way we communicate and relate to one another, though at the time we could not have imaged to what extent.

Twitter hinted at the possibility that everyone, wherever we might be, could take part in public conversations; and YouTube promised us the chance to create audiovisual content without the intermediation of producers and media owners deciding who got a platform, who appeared on screen, or what audiences were allowed to see.

It was an unprecedented democratization of public space. A conversation about aspects of public life, now open to everyone without hierarchies or filters. The assumption was that the more people expressed their opinions publicly, the richer any discussion would become, nourished by as many nuances as contributions the topic might inspire.

Could anything be more democratic?

But if there is a thankless trade, it is that of the prophet, especially when one predicts what seems obvious. Twenty years after the communication revolution that was supposed to put

everyone's voice within everyone's reach, citizens are not better informed, public opinion has not become more horizontal, and the world is no more democratic.

According to Joan Hoey, director of the Democracy Index at The Economist Intelligence Unit, humanity is experiencing what is referred to as a prolonged democratic recession. A report published in 2024 by that organization (twenty years after the launch of Facebook) indicates that the world is at its lowest level since 2006 (the year Twitter was created), with a score of 5.17 out of 10 on that index. Of the 167 countries analyzed, only 7% of the global population lives in one of the 25 that can be considered full democracies.

Could there be a connection between the timing of the rise of social networks (meant to help democratize public discussion) and the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism? To what extent might they be responsible for the disinformation, polarization, and political manipulation that have contributed to democracy's erosion?

Twenty years later, if anything is clear, it is that the assumption that a greater number of voices would mean greater plurality of ideas did not prove so obvious in practice. Nor that the "knowledge society" would be the great panacea. And this may be explained by one fact: these social networks were not created to deepen democracy and freedom of expression, but to ensure people spent as much time as possible within their boundaries. Their creators were not thinking of citizens but of users. In other words, consumers.

So, if the goal was to keep people consuming content on social media for as long as possible, the design of their algorithms

would aim to offer each user the greatest amount of content aligned with their profile (including like-minded opinions). This may work well for bringing together people who enjoy dark-humor films or who are fond of romantic novels set in dystopian worlds. However, it is far less beneficial when it comes to debating controversial topics such as abortion, migrants' access to public services, or same-sex marriage, to name just a few.

On the other hand, fostering in users the habit of sharing only with those who think like them did not help them exercise the muscle of tolerance; on the contrary, it encouraged them to radicalize their opinions as a way of safeguarding them from those who might disagree.

What happens when people regularly socialize with others they tend to agree with, yet do so in a space where other individuals —people they don't know, who share no common references— are also participating in the same conversations?

A shared language doesn't mean shared understanding

Add to this the rise of the influencer and the obsession with profitability, we end up with a space far less democratic than the one we had when our only public communication options were letters to the newspaper editor or live calls to radio talk shows.

This dynamic reduces discourse to the realm of slogans. Social media has simplified the exercise of thought to the point where developing ideas has become nearly impossible. In other words, they reduce reality to phrases as hard to refute as they are to defend.

The speed of publishing, the limited willingness to read carefully, and the dominance of visuals over text are shaping public opinion into one with fewer independent views and a greater tendency to align with dominant sides in a discussion. Nuance gradually thins out until it disappears from the core of the debate, since the algorithm favors interactions that generate high activity (controversial opinions) or those that carry the most weight. And when interactions become polarized and flattened, is there any real possibility of forming an opinion?

More importantly, is there any real chance to choose?

These are times of slogans and Manichaeism, a perfect environment that paves the way for the rise of leaders who manipulate public opinion with half-truths, distorted realities, exaggerated dangers, and the stirring of collective fears. Times in which influence is exerted not through convincing argument but through vehement assertion. This has given rise to demagogues, manipulators, and populists who emerge after the political ideas that once shaped the world have collapsed in the face of a reality they can no longer explain. These are times of gentrification, process automation, and new technological empires in which “human rights” are nonexistent on the agendas of power groups, and where productivity and performance are the only valid measures.

It would be difficult for democracy to be strengthened in such an environment. Easy, however, for de facto powers to take advantage of this dynamic to impose frameworks of opinion that foster division and polarization as tools for maintaining control.

How can consensus be built (which is the purpose of politics) when the only way to confront a discourse is to assemble a group

of equal size and force? This makes it impossible to gather the sum of perspectives that would form a common idea. Citizens are left trapped in extreme, polarized, and radical positions that benefit only those who promote them.

This is where disinformation and the one-sided communication that social media readers have grown accustomed to come into play. Examples of this can be seen every day. A recent case is the extradition of Venezuelans to El Salvador under the Trump administration. The Chavista regime (which holds prisoners without fair trial) took up the banner of defending those extradited, which caused many people to position themselves on the opposite side without attempting to develop a measured stance. It was not about agreeing with the expulsions; that detail was overshadowed by a simpler logic: the point was to oppose Chavismo.

Another side of the issue was focusing the discussion on whether tattoos identify gang members, generating a controversy that overlooked the core matter. This tactic is often used by those in power to distract from substantive issues in decision-making, avoiding public scrutiny. They know how to stir the masses, who have little capacity to develop ideas, and place them wherever they wish.

Each case has its particular considerations. Every human being is unique. But that notion carries no weight in the dynamics of social networks, which are factories of slogans crafted to be wielded in a tweet. And the simpler they are, the more likes they get.

Those in power often lie, but on social media, they do so with a precise intention: they take advantage of the bewilderment and confusion generated by information overload, so that people

choose not to believe anything they read. One lie cancels out the truth. This is how reality is experienced in the so-called information society.

This logic is evident in the fact that the opinion of someone with sufficient power becomes a law that overrides even what the laws themselves state. And in the absence of a solid institutional structure, it effectively becomes the Law.

Twitter is not public life, but its logic has been transferred to public life. It is not reality, yet it represents it to the point where the two are confused.

The loss of Petare as an electoral stronghold of Chavismo occurred gradually and steadily over several years. The breaking point came on the night of July 28, when videos circulated showing people celebrating in the streets after the results were announced at polling stations in this vast urban conglomeration. The following day, a spontaneous protest set out from there, moving through Caracas, until police and armed civilians managed to disperse it on Baralt Avenue, just a few blocks from Miraflores.

By the night of July 28, it was evident that Petare was lost as an electoral stronghold for Chavismo, and the repression and cordon put in place in the following days completely extinguished any remaining support from the community.

Politically and electorally neutralized among its residents, the symbolic and strategic significance of a neighborhood —or more accurately, an interconnected network of neighborhoods— like Petare pushed the regime to consider it urgent to regain control at any cost.

One of the “landings” in this takeover was the Matapalo sports court, located in the San Blas neighborhood, the epicenter of a citizen project led by the organization *Uniendo Voluntades*, which had transformed it into an open-air museum of graffiti and murals. One day, a crew of municipal workers arrived with instructions to “recover” the court, which had been the pride of a community that turned a truck parking lot into a first-rate sports facility. The crew repainted (erased) the work of local residents and several muralists from various places, who had contributed their enthusiasm to a project that went beyond cleaning and painting, promoting workshops in film, photography, literature, comics, and other artistic disciplines.

This process, which developed over several years, produced a valuable pool of creators within that community. In the face of the crushing of this remarkable work (too much autonomy for the liking of people who need to control), Katy Camargo, the leader of the organization, stated, “They are not erasing anything from us. We are agents of change.”

And it was not a matter of resignation, but of the certainty that the purpose of the movement had been achieved: for residents, under the motto “el barrio también es ciudad,” to see themselves as dignified citizens.

They knew that the court was a symbol of an entire body of work. Still, as such, it was only a visible representation of something already internalized and matured among its inhabitants, and therefore impossible to colonize: the exercise of thought, community organization, the decision to live with dignity, and the expression of a worldview through artistic creation.

Another interesting experience in times of constricted spaces for dialogue is the digital media outlet *La Vida de Nos*, which aims to document the country's contemporary history through the perspective of ordinary people. One of its principles asserts that telling life stories is a way to combat a single narrative. In pursuit of this goal —telling life— they have already produced nearly eight hundred stories: eight hundred personal testimonies that convey the complexity of the country through its nuances.

Life in common, seen through the diversity of each experience

And so, there are several collective experiences of art consumption in the city that help combat the imposition of a single voice. Outdoor cinema organized by Circuito Gran Cine in various communities, events by La Poeteca, and even the widespread street art gatherings bring people together to coexist and respect others' visions of shared space. Each individual possesses a reality that deserves to be heard because it enriches that of others. That is what it is about. Small exercises with great significance. Against the singular story, it is the certainty that each perspective adds to the chorus of expressions about our shared human experience. Coming together as an exercise in citizenship, community, and respect for one another.

Stimulating creativity and the consumption of artistic expressions combats the imposition of thought, Manichaeism, and polarization; it educates critical individuals capable of discerning and dissenting from their own reality regarding life's issues, rather than blindly subscribing to dominant narratives. People who ask questions and accept no answer as absolute, contrary to what public discussion on social media promotes, where polarized,

Manichaeian, and manipulative slogans dominate discourse, distorting and impoverishing the perception of reality.

The system is designed so that people cannot choose, and therefore cannot think. Artistic expression is the representation of life seen from within. It is the reflection of who we are as beings born into a culture. It encourages inquiries into the values we take as valid.

Joseph Campbell noted that the function of art is to reveal that light which shines in all things. The beautiful organization behind a well-composed work reminds us of the order present in our own lives; an order, it is worth noting, from which we are frequently distracted amid daily agitation. Seeing the world from a broader perspective refocuses us on what we must not forget to avoid alienation.

And most importantly, art stimulates compassion. The understanding that the other is as mysterious and sacred, as incredible and inevitable, as oneself. That within the other lies a unique universe, and therefore their perspective enriches our own. Promoting the practice and consumption of artistic expressions becomes an antidote to times of slogans. Modest and without guarantees, of course, but one of the few tools humanity has to avoid forgetting its condition.

To Cultivate the Democratic Soul

Juan Ernesto Bonadies

*May we remember what the Romans thought:
a cultivated person ought to be: one who knows
how to choose his company among men,
among things, among thoughts, in the present
as well as in the past.*

Hannah Arendt¹

Preamble

In philosophical diagnoses of civilization since the 20th century, the notion that it suffers from a *crisis of meaning* has been a recurring theme. Addressing this has become of utmost importance, and the word meaning itself is suggestive in several respects: meaning as *orientation* or *direction* —we have become confused and lost our sense of direction— and meaning as *value* and *significance* —the distinction of what truly matters and its ultimate purposes.

At present, that crisis converges with another: the crisis of democracy. The gradual entry into a post-democratic era entails the transition toward inauthentic political systems, which remain

1 Hannah Arendt, “La crisis en la cultura: su significado político y social”, in *Entre el pasado y el futuro. Ocho ejercicios sobre la reflexión política*, Ediciones Península, Barcelona, 1996, 238.

democratic in a normative sense, on paper, but in practice steadily diminish the impact of citizen participation.

With the digital era and the great accumulation of information and stimuli received every hour from anywhere in the world, globalization has also been consolidated. To the extent that this reception of varied global information increases, the relevance of the local is also displaced —the same human limitation does not allow us to attend to all of it, and if we try, we will do so superficially. In Venezuela, particularly, in view of the disenchantment with the political situation, information deserts, censorship, and self-censorship of the press and the citizenry, migration, poverty, and other factors, media attention and popular interest often pour outward, with the result that what becomes culturally relevant is, for the most part, exogenous.

We can affirm, based on these briefly outlined —but far more complex— situations, that in the digital era we face a paradox: we are *hyperconnected*, yet *disconnected*. The ubiquity of screens has transformed the structure through which we apprehend reality and human relationships, bringing us closer to what is far away and to those who are distant, while at other times distancing us from that and those who are near. Spectacle and entertainment have inflamed passions. It is hardly insignificant to note that this has political and cultural effects, for it results in a constant shifting of our interests and an immediate distortion of our desires and values.

In the face of this, we may still persevere in cultivating the democratic soul —though not without first clarifying certain matters.

True Liberty and Culture

Giovanni Sartori indicated, in one of his lessons on democracy,² that philosophy concerns itself with *inner freedom*, while politics concerns itself with outer freedom. This is *political freedom*: the power-to-act without external impediments, without being oppressed —yet also without oppressing others, for reciprocity must mediate.

Generally, when people speak of freedom, they think of this type of freedom. However, the political consequences of having neglected *inner freedom* are significant —the freedom of the individual who perfects himself by *choosing the good*.³ Philosophy, as Sartori says, is concerned with this type of freedom. Above all, ethics —based on philosophical anthropology— seeks to study it theoretically and practically for the virtuous *formation* of the human being. From philosophy itself, and from a classical idea of education aimed at achieving the highest levels of freedom, arises the idea of culture as the *cultivation of the soul*. The problem? We no longer use the word culture in that sense.

The relevance of this becomes evident when we assume that democracy, for its defense and preservation, requires the formation of a *democratic culture*, one that encompasses a set of values considered democratic. José Francisco Juárez and Ignacio

2 Giovanni Sartori, “Lección 13. La libertad política”, in *La democracia en treinta lecciones*, Taurus, Bogotá, 2009, 67-69.

3 George Weigel, drawing on Saint Thomas Aquinas, calls this the *freedom for excellence*. His essay “Two Ideas of Freedom”, —in *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God*, Basic Books, Nueva York, 2005, 78-86— delves into the need to reconnect freedom with moral truth.

Sepúlveda list among these values: dialogue, tolerance, solidarity, respect, peace, honesty, and justice.⁴

Every good citizen understands, to a greater or lesser extent, what the existence of a vigorous *democratic culture* implies –participation of a well-informed citizenry interested in public *affairs*, separation of powers, equality before the law and compliance with it, strong and transparent institutions... Yet the same cannot be said for the idea of *culture* itself, whose meaning has expanded to the point of being emptied.

Broadly speaking, today we use the term “culture” to mean the set of beliefs, values, norms, knowledge, and expressions of a particular social group, as well as the entire symbolic and material corpus created, shared, and transmitted by that group. These groups vary in size: when we say “Western culture,” we are referring to half the world, and to a single country when we say “Venezuelan culture.” We also speak of “urban culture,” meaning the culture of big cities, or of “university culture” or “corporate culture” when referring to certain institutions. And so, we apply the term to many different contexts. However, we also use the word to denote harmful realities: “death culture,” “criminal culture,” “rape culture,” “narco culture,” and other social misfortunes.

This general definition of culture, which we use in everyday life, becomes problematic when faced with its antonym: cultural deprivation (inculture). We quickly realize that when we speak of “culture” in relation to harmful ways of life, we are falling

4 José Francisco Juárez, Ignacio Sepúlveda, *Educación para vivir en democracia. Aportes y desafíos de las universidades jesuitas en la formación ciudadana*, abediciones, Caracas, 2025, 11-18. The authors contextualize the current crisis of democracy, which also encompasses a crisis of values and, therefore, presents a challenge for education in this field.

into a contradiction: we speak of culture where there is actually a lack of it. Many authors have pointed this out. Mario Vargas Llosa, for example, stated that “the borders that separated culture from lack of culture, cultured people from uncultured people, have disappeared from our vocabulary, frightened off by the thought of appearing politically incorrect,” and that, as a result, “we now live in a world of confusion, in which, paradoxically, since there is now no way of knowing what culture is, then everything is culture and nothing is.”⁵

Long before (in 1933), Werner Jaeger also noted this:

*We are accustomed to use the word culture, not to describe the ideal which only the Hellenocentric world possesses, but in a much more trivial and general sense, to denote something inherent in every nation of the world, even the most primitive. We use it for the entire complex of all the ways and expressions of life which characterize any one nation. Thus the word has sunk to mean a simple anthropological concept, not a concept of value, a consciously pursued ideal.*⁶

The Classical Sense of Culture

For Jaeger, the original conception of culture goes back to Greek *paideia*. There is no specific definition of this word; in fact, it is untranslatable. Jaeger understands *paideia* as the Greek mode of education, based on the “community of ideals and social and spiritual forms” of the Greeks, whose goal was to achieve the “creation of a higher type of man,”⁷ who, in understanding himself

5 Mario Vargas Llosa, “Breve discurso sobre la cultura”, in *La civilización del espectáculo*, Alfaguara, Madrid, 2012, 68-69.

6 Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: los ideales de la cultura griega*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1957, 6.

7 Ibid., 5-6.

as *zoon politikón* (ζῷον πολιτικόν) places himself at the service of the political community: “in the best period of Greece, a spirit alien to the state was as impossible as a state alien to the spirit.”⁸ Recognizing ourselves as heirs to *paideia*, Jaeger dedicated himself to returning to the Greek sources, seeking ideas powerful enough to reorient the West —a civilization that, over the past centuries, has drifted into confusion and a slow shipwreck of meaning.

The Homeric epics stand as the great formative mine of the Greek people. In then, we see the very beginning of humanism: the scene in the Iliad where Priam, father of Hector, aided by the gods, enters the camp of Achilles —the wrathful slayer of his son— to beg for the return of Hector’s body. Priam clasps Achilles’ knees, kisses his hands, and implores him to recall his own father. Then...

*Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire
to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man’s hand
he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory
both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely
for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching
before Achilles’ feet as Achilles wept himself,
now for his father, now for Patroclus once again,
and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house.*⁹

There, the primacy of the human becomes evident. Humanism begins with *eusebeia* (εὐσέβεια), the piety of Achilles¹⁰, and, along

8 Ibid., 13.

9 Homero, *Iliada*. Canto XXIV, vv. 507-512.

10 This idea was expressed by Professor Sebastián Porrini in the first session of his Introduction to Humanism, which was part of the Second Stoicism Meeting Mexico —Chamber of Deputies, “EN VIVO / Curso Especial: Introducción al Humanismo”, June 26, 2023, 10:32, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7mzL8o1i0w>

with it, *sympátheia* (συμπάθεια), compassion, which unfolds in the weeping of both, in their shared grief.

After Homer, *philosophía* (φιλοσοφία), the love of wisdom, represented another great achievement of the Greeks' formative genius, not only for matters of the soul but also for those of the State. Plato and Aristotle developed their unfading ethical and metaphysical ideas, which provided the foundation for the earliest political theories.

Today, we inherit modern political philosophy, which separates politics from ethics, now grounding politics in relations of power. We can then ask: what grounds that power? It seems to be fear —fear of punishment for not obeying the law, for example, or fear of the strength of the powerful. However, Plato witnessed his teacher, Socrates, being unjustly sentenced to death and going to his death without fear, even rejecting a disciple's proposal to help him escape from prison.¹¹ Socrates's lesson through his death reveals to us that there is something that transcends the contingency of power relations: the highest inner freedom.

Paideia, that ideal of human education, sought to build this freedom. But it still had nothing to do with what we call culture. It becomes translated as such through the Romans' interpretation. The word derives from the verb *colere*, "to cultivate," in Latin; thus, the Roman idea of culture evokes a powerful metaphor: agriculture, which produces fruits to nourish us, and these give us health. Cicero says, in this regard: *cultura animi autem philosophia est* ("philosophy is the cultivation of the soul").¹²

11 The sentence, his refusal to escape, and the death of Socrates are narrated in a sequence of three Platonic dialogues: the *Apology* of Socrates, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*.

12 Cicero, *Disputationes Tuscularnas*. Libro II, 13.

Cultivating Democracy

Any sphere of the human that prides itself on being formative of culture must reflect that sequence evoked by Cicero's metaphor of *cultura animi*:

Cultivation → Fruit → Nourishment → Health¹³.

A *democratic culture* must root itself in the cultivation of democracy within the human soul —that is, in the values of its citizens— and show that these values foster not only the health of the republic —moral, civic, and institutional— but also the very well-being of each individual spirit.

Returning to this classical idea of culture, as well as ensuring that it connects with the values of democracy, is a challenge we face today in the context explained at the beginning: multiple crises amid the digital era, whose abundant stimuli threaten autonomy over a basic element of the human structure: the external senses. Specifically, we are talking about *sight* and *hearing*.

We must first consider, as has long been known, that “all knowledge must begin with the external senses.”¹⁴ We must first consider, as has long been known, that “all knowledge must begin with the external senses.” We also know that the accumulation of digital information is received through sight and hearing, since its media are predominantly audiovisual. In the preamble, we

13 This is my interpretation, which I consider can guide the analysis of the expressions of social groups so as not to fall into cultural relativism.

14 José Ángel García Cuadrado, *Antropología filosófica. Una introducción a la Filosofía del Hombre* EUNSA, Pamplona, 2010, 55. The author continues in the same paragraph: “Aristotle affirms that nothing exists in the intellect that was not previously in the senses. (...) The point of contact between material reality and the knowing subject occurs in the external senses”.

mentioned the *crisis of meaning*, but what if this crisis points to a *crisis of the senses*?

We could ask ourselves: are we active in *choosing* and caring for what we see and hear? Faced with the abundant audiovisual stimuli, are we truly masters of our *attention*? Undoubtedly, a large part of the population would answer no, that they waste a great deal of time consuming the vacuous “content” of their feed. This translates into a diminishment of inner freedom, making people more susceptible to political manipulation. Thus, if the principle of our knowledge is access to reality through the external senses, but we have no autonomy over what we see and hear, we will not truly have it over what we think either.

Attentional manipulation harms democracy. As David Cerdá wrote: “When attention is overstimulated or fatigued, it tends to be drawn to the extreme. The sociopolitical polarization that our societies suffer from is also a child of the frenzied traffic of chatter and news in which we are immersed.”¹⁵

Cultivating democracy, then, also requires cultivating our senses.

Some ideas from Venezuelan thinkers

Carlos Cruz-Diez had already written at the end of the last century: “The volume of visual and auditory information in modern societies has rendered us *visually deaf* and *auditorily blind*.”¹⁶ The truth of that statement, as we have seen, has become increasingly evident due to the impact of new information

15 David Cerdá, *El dilema de Neo. ¿Cuánta verdad hay en nuestras vidas?*, Ediciones Rialp, Madrid, 2024, cap. “Entornar los ojos”.

16 Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Reflexión sobre el color*. Fabriart Ediciones, 1989, 53.

technologies and social media. It affects us, on one hand —as Venezuelan philosopher Rafael Tomás Caldera says— the simultaneity and immediacy of everything received; on the other hand, the emergence of a “second reality”:

*By usurping the place of the primary experience of the real, this second reality leads us to a false cosmopolitanism, made up of poorly digested impressions, which reduce everything to something flat, without much depth, where ultimately what matters will be whatever touches our sensibilities in some way, always for a brief time.*¹⁷

The form of sensory impressions in audiovisual media obscures the substance, and globally standardized content displaces the local with that superficial cosmopolitanism of which Caldera speaks. But we are not advocating for a closed-off localism against this —as the philosopher clarifies in another essay—,¹⁸ but rather for a deepening of the best we have in order to reach a *true universality*. In an essay on “Intellectual Vassalage,” Arturo Usler Pietri defended a similar idea, seeking a middle ground between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, affirming our value and place in the world without isolating ourselves from it.¹⁹

17 Rafael Tomás Caldera, *La filosofía en la nueva era tecnológica*. Conference given at the Andrés Bello Catholic University on April 2, 2025, <https://abediciones.ucab.edu.ve/la-filosofia-en-la-nueva-era-tecnologica/>

18 Rafael Tomás Caldera, “Mentalidad colonial”, in *Ensayos sobre nuestra situación cultural*, Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, Caracas, 2007, 143-160.

19 “There is as much risk in proposing to be unmistakably cosmopolitan —a risk of insipidity and superficiality, of convention and falseness— as there is in striving to be fiercely autochthonous —a risk of falling into costumbrismo and local complacency”, Arturo Usler Pietri, *Cuarenta ensayos*, Monte Ávila Editores, 1990, 240.

However, since we are indeed immersed in *superficial cosmopolitanism*, many troubling phenomena arise. We see how the nonsense of publications proliferates, which seem to be the atrophied and scattered heirs of Dadaism. The example of shitpost-type memes has already become emblematic, along with other content that has caused in young people the much-talked-about brain rot.

Sensationalism, fake news, or so-called “rage baiting” —a manipulation strategy that uses posts designed to provoke anger or outrage and thus drive more interactions— has also prompted many honest communication researchers to establish fact-checking organizations. Yet these efforts face massive, well-funded laboratories dedicated to manipulating public opinion in favor of economic or political interests, as well as the negligence of easily swayed users who share false information without verifying it. The hyperrealism of new generative Artificial Intelligences has also arrived to confuse us even more about what is real and what is not.

All this would not be a problem if we did not allow ourselves to be carried away by superficial first impressions, if we attended deeply to the reality of what we see and hear before reacting for or against, with naïve praise or undeserved insult (attitudes that, it must be said, mutilate democracy).

The senses can be cultivated. Seeing and hearing (and the activities pertaining to other senses) are part of a level of reality that must be educated so as to be elevated and placed at the service of truth, goodness, and beauty. Juan David García Bacca, a Spanish philosopher who became a Venezuelan citizen, made this clear:

*It is as possible and frequent to think without reflecting as it is to see without looking, to hear without listening, to drink without tasting, to touch without caressing. Naturally, human eyes are, by being human eyes, thinking eyes; but not for that reason alone do we look, nor do we marvel at the things we see. We usually snatch them up in one stroke through the eyes, like vulgar and armored gluttons (...). Similarly, it is not enough to think of a man, to see that it is a man with whom I am dealing; it is necessary to know what it means to be a man, in order to truly know that it is a man with whom I am dealing.*²⁰

For this reason, recognizing others and affirming their dignity must be reflected in how we relate to them: we truly look at them, not merely see them; we genuinely listen, not just hear. Yet the superficiality and immediacy of our age make it harder to engage with this deeper dimension of sensory reality, and, as a result, to cultivate democratic values, which are rooted in the awareness of our shared otherness: there is no “I” without a “You”; my dignity exists only because there is *another* who is equally worthy.

The importance of recognizing the *other* led Antonio Pasquali —Venezuelan pioneer of communication studies in Latin America, who focused part of his research on the link between the quality of democracy and that of public opinion— to propose the need to build a new morality of intersubjectivity, as the fruit of an ethical project that seeks, first and foremost, “to recover the relationship (with values such as respect, authentic dialogue, openness, reciprocity) as a supreme category.” In light of the

20 Juan David García Bacca, “On the great importance of philosophizing, the lesser of philosophy, the least of philosophers.”, in *Ensayos y estudios*, comp. y sel. Cristina García Palacios y José Rafael Revenga, Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, Caracas, 2002, 255-266.

spurious “interactivity” of mass media, it is worth revisiting such proposals.

Conclusion

In his allegory of the cave, Plato²¹ imagines the captive who left the cave returning to tell the others about the vast reality he witnessed outside; but those who only knew the shadows did not believe him and mocked him... we may listen to and look at the other, but how can we make the other listens to us and looks at us with the same openness? There lies yet another challenge.

However, one must not falter in the attempt. Achilles, in his rage, could have annihilated Priam, and he, contemplating that possibility, still went to the camp of the man who had killed his son. Perhaps if Homer had written an ending like that, there would have been no *paideia* at all, and Western culture would not be as we know it.

Moreover, it is clear that defending democracy in the digital age requires the cultivation of the senses, especially sight and hearing: transcending the stimuli of visual noise to begin choosing what we look at, beyond the algorithms, which now act as catalysts for confirmation biases that radicalize users; transcending the ego, the unfounded opinion, and beginning to listen to the other. In this way, silence gains value for those who deem it necessary if they wish to later express well-founded opinions, if they want their voice to carry the strength of upright speech rather than the frivolity of prevailing chatter.

As we can see, this translates into an education for inner freedom, which has political effects. Cultivating the spiritual

21 Platoón, *La República*, Libro VII.

potency of the senses, so damaged and manipulated in these times, is just one of the many tasks in the titanic labor of defending democracy in our era.

We must begin by listening to ourselves.

We must begin by looking at ourselves.

And we must do so attentively, cordially, and deeply.

Peter Burke: “Having instant access to so much information is a blessing, but it comes at a cost.”

Jesús Piñero

*What about the knowledge that has been lost over the centuries? Are we really less ignorant than those who came before us? These are the central questions of *Ignorance: A Global History*.¹ In this brief email interview, the author addresses a few more.*

“Humanity is becoming less ignorant than in the past, thanks to research in both the sciences and the humanities, but as individuals we are as ignorant as our ancestors, just about different things,” says British historian Ulick Peter Burke when I ask whether we’re truly wiser today. I don’t ask the question at random. I have just read the first chapter of his new book *Ignorance: A Global History* and was fascinated, which is why I emailed him with little expectation of a quick reply.

His reply reached my inbox in less than a week: “Dear Mr. Pinero, good to hear from you. I don’t hear very well, so an interview by phone or even Zoom might not work. And in any case, although I read Spanish, I don’t speak it (though I do speak Brazilian Portuguese).” I’ve never liked

1 Peter Burke, *Ignorancia: Una historia global*, Alianza editorial, 2023.

interviews by email: not only does the humanity of dialogue get lost, but follow-up questions are always harder to frame. Still, I ended up accepting his proposal: “But if you send written questions in Spanish, I would be happy to send answers in English.” Of course, Mr. Burke.

Over the last 87 years —the current age of Burke— not only has the world changed, but so have the ways and sources through which we understand the past; in other words, the historiographical currents themselves. When young Ulick began taking his first steps in the London neighborhood of Stanmore in 1939, the journal *Annales*, founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, was celebrating its first decade, and Marxism was just beginning to make its way in response to the crisis of positivism, which had been floundering since the late 19th century. Burke was thus born in the midst of the historiographical revolution of the 20th century —the one to which historians owe the very profession itself.

That is why it is no coincidence that his main contributions —aside from focusing on the understanding of the Early Modern Age— are rooted in the use of *new sources* and methodologies for the study of the past, sources we now take for granted when conducting research; hence the italics: art, literature, music, cinema, and so on. And it could not have been otherwise: the 20th century was the century of media, of mass cultural production, of television, musical hits, cinematic premieres, and bestsellers. Society changed, and with it, the formats through which it must be studied. To ignore that would be to deny history.

Peter Burke: "Having instant access to so much information is a blessing, but it comes at a cost."

And that is also the focus of his new book: opinions about the past often run into a dichotomy: either we believe we are wiser than people in earlier times, or we believe that everything was better back then. But are we truly less ignorant than our ancestors? Or did past societies possess knowledge superior to what we have today? In *Ignorance: A Global History* (Alianza Editorial, 2023), Burke sets out to answer these questions by tracing key moments in human history, situating them within their respective contexts, and contrasting them with what has been studied about the very concept of ignorance.

I took a few days to prepare for the exchange: I reread the book, researched more about his life, searched for past interviews, and even mentioned it to several colleagues. Once I felt ready, I sent the email and decided to put the matter out of my mind. Perhaps he wouldn't reply. Perhaps time would work against me, and the conversation I had prepared for so carefully would never take place. But that wasn't the case. In less than two days, an email arrived in my inbox with an attached document containing his responses —in impeccable British English, complete with italics and an admirable precision. The file was named simply with his lowercase initials, followed by a hyphen and my surname: pb-pinero.

—We live in a hyper-informed society, yet this overload of information doesn't always translate into less ignorance. How dangerous is it to be overinformed, or to have immediate and unlimited access to knowledge?

Having immediate access to so much information is a blessing, but it comes at a cost. Our time is limited, and thus we

must choose what we want to know and what to ignore, and we may not always choose wisely. In any case, what we often get is raw information, whereas what we want –or should want– is knowledge: processed information that has been verified, critiqued, and classified. What we actually have access to is information that is often inaccurate and potentially biased, provided to serve the interests of individuals or organizations. We, the recipients, must learn to be critical of this mass of information and to select carefully from it.

–If we are closer to knowledge, why does it seem as though the world is heading toward an abyss? Climate change, the crisis of democracy. More and more figures like Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, or Chávez keep emerging...

This pessimism may be the result of greater knowledge. Global warming, for example, was happening long before most people became aware of it. As for the rise of populism today, democracy has faced crises before: consider Hitler, Mussolini, Franco... The problems are real, yet they are not confined to the present moment..

–Speaking of the crisis of democracy, are you familiar with what is happening in Venezuela? There aren't many references to Latin America in your book.

I know a little about recent events in Venezuela, but not much. I've never been there. I know more about Argentina, Chile, and especially Brazil, which is mentioned several times in my book. You see? I, too, am ignorant about many things.

Peter Burke: "Having instant access to so much information is a blessing, but it comes at a cost."

—All right, but regarding the little you know about the situation in Venezuela, do you think Venezuelans were ignorant of the past when they chose Hugo Chávez?

Yes, but they are not alone. In democratic elections, many voters know little about the candidates and their policies, making it difficult to determine the basis of their choices. Surveys on voter ignorance are revealing and alarming. As for Chávez, I don't know enough to answer that question. Like everyone else, I must choose what to know.

—How dangerous is it when people and their leaders ignore the past?

—Although history never repeats itself exactly, similar situations do recur, and there are many examples of leaders making the same mistakes as their predecessors, mistakes that could have been avoided with greater knowledge of the past. Otto von Bismarck once said, "Only fools learn from their own experience; I prefer to learn from the experience of others."

—What do you consider is the greatest knowledge we have lost as a society?

There isn't a single piece or form of knowledge I would privilege in that way. However, I am concerned about the decline of historical knowledge, now that less time is devoted to it in schools —at least in Britain— than when I was a student. Much of that time is spent on national history. To properly educate future citizens, more time should be devoted to world history from the last 100 years.

–Will we ever be able to eliminate ignorance, or is it necessary?

We will always be ignorant of something.

–Then, what is the role of historians in the face of ignorance?

We try to help people understand the world they live in, including the social and cultural structures underlying the current events discussed in the media. These structures change, but only slowly, over the long term. We can also help people become critical of the news –whether it is false, inaccurate, or superficial. What is sometimes pompously called “critical information studies” today has long been familiar to historians; it is simply “source criticism.”

Authors

Ana Teresa Torres

She is a Venezuelan writer, psychologist, and professor. She studied psychology at the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB) in Caracas and has a long and distinguished academic and research career in the field of psychology and psychoanalysis.

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

has a Bachelor degree in Mass Communication Studies from the Andrés Bello Catholic University (2002). He has a Masters Degree in Investigative Journalism, Data, and Visualization from Rey Juan Carlos University and Unidad Editorial, Spain (2013). He is a journalist specializing in political affairs with experience in the newspapers *Tal Cual* and *El Universal*.

Héctor Torres

He is a Venezuelan writer, has been a professor, and is recognized as a tenacious promoter of literature and culture in his country. He has created and participated in publishing and literary dissemination initiatives in Venezuela. Known as an expert chronicler of the city of Caracas, he has delved into the soul of the city to tell stories that encapsulate that soul in all its splendor. Héctor Torres, together with Albor Rodríguez, is the creator of *La vida de nos*, a renowned organization that carries out a creative and innovative crusade to resist and record the times that Venezuela is currently experiencing. Less known for his love of music, Héctor Torres is one of the essential references in Venezuelan culture today.

Juan Ernesto Bonadies

Communications specialist and assistant professor (Monteávila University). Co-host of the philosophical outreach project *Filosofando Sin Filtros*.

Jesús Piñero

Jesús Piñero is a historian and journalist from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), where he is also a professor at the Department of Mass Communication Studies. He is the author of “Miradas reversas: 15 historiadores cuentan su historia,” “Canaima de carne y huesos,” and compiler of “Venezuela: documentos para su estudio (1498-1999).” He won the Rafael María Baralt History Prize 2021-2022 for his research “José Rafael Pocaterra, periodista en Nueva York. La oposición a Juan Vicente Gómez desde el exilio (1922-1923).” He regularly contributes to various Venezuelan media outlets.

Index

Ana Teresa Torres: "In times of hardship,
we need the bonds that connect
us in solidarity."

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

2

Stimulating Nuance is Stimulating
Thought

Héctor Torres

7

To Cultivate the Democratic Soul

Juan Ernesto Bonadies

16

Peter Burke: "Having instant access
to so much information is a blessing,
but it comes at a cost."

Jesús Piñero

30

Authors

36