

To Cultivate the Democratic Soul

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*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 I, 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* (εὐσεβεία), the piety of Achilles¹⁰, and, along

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Homero, *Ilíada*. 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 Tusculanas*. 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.