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Educating for Democracy

We are approaching the inauguration of Venezuelan democracy. The possibility is no longer a remote conjecture, but a horizon that is beginning to take shape with greater definition. And that proximity compels us to think more deeply about what is at stake. Venezuela does not merely need a change of rulers, or even a more or less successful institutional readjustment. What is decisive is something else: whether the country is capable of sustaining freedom when it ceases to be a dream and becomes a social reality. Or, in other words, whether we can reverse the damage caused by injustice in the individual soul of each Venezuelan.¹

Democracy is not exhausted by elections or agreements, although both are indispensable. Above all, it is a form of public life sustained by habits, by boundaries of civic concord that citizens have internalized, and by a certain moral discipline that makes it possible to live together without resorting to imposition. Without this foundation, freedom becomes unstable, wears down,

1 Paola Bautista de Alemán, "Reflexiones sobre el daño antropológico en Venezuela," *Red Forma*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://red-forma.com/articulo/reflexiones-sobre-el-dano-antropologico-en-venezuela-paola-bautista-de-aleman/>

loses its substance, and becomes an illusion that cannot endure over time.

For this reason, the problem before us is not merely political in the strict sense. To a large extent, it is an educational problem. It is a matter of educating citizens capable of living in a democracy, not merely of winning or receiving one; of educating the civic soul of the country in the habit of justice, so that freedom is not an isolated episode in our national history, but an experience that can be carried forward over time and endure. For freedom may arrive as a circumstantial and ephemeral event, but it can only be sustained structurally through civic virtue.

It is therefore worth structuring a broad-strokes reflection on what it means to educate for democracy: first, an examination of conscience as a people, to understand what happened and how it was possible; second, an education in memory, preserving the experience we have lived through as a lesson learned, as a republican cautionary tale; third, an education for the rule of law, as the foundation of life in common; and fourth, education for social justice in freedom, avoiding both domination by the state and indifference on the part of citizens.

Let us consider each of these aspects.

A People's Examination of Conscience

The starting point here is not comfortable, but it is necessary.

The autocracy we have endured cannot be explained solely as the emergence of a group that seized power, but also as the result of a civic illness within the Venezuelan people as a

whole.² That undoubtedly happened, but it is not enough. This process encountered conditions that made it possible, and those conditions existed, to some extent, within Venezuelan society—in its understanding of politics, its relationship with power, and its everyday habits.

Over the years, what was essential was gradually eroded. Privilege ceased to be the exception and began to become the rule; abuse ceased to provoke social outrage, and lying became commonplace in public life. The will of autocrats grew accustomed to imposing itself without limits or checks and balances, and this habituation slowly undermined the very idea of legitimate authority.

At the same time, a disproportionate expectation of the state took hold. Everything had to come from there; everything had to be resolved from there. And, paradoxically, while everything was demanded of the state, people stopped demanding limits from it. The instinct for restraint that characterizes a society that knows itself to be free—and understands that power must be restrained in order not to overreach—was gradually lost.

In this context, democracy began to be seen as something given, rather than something that requires care, vigilance, and constant commitment. This was perhaps one of Venezuelans' most serious failings. For when Hugo Chávez came along, he opened the door to a form of power that encountered insufficient resistance in its earliest manifestations.³

2 Cfr. Julio Borges y Paola Bautista de Alemán, *La patria que viene*, Dahbar, Caracas, 2021.

3 Juan Miguel Matheus, "Configuración ideológica de la Revolución Bolivariana," *Red Forma*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://red-forma.com/articulo/configuracion-ideologica-de-la-revolucion-bolivariana/>

It is true that there were different degrees of responsibility. Not everyone did the same thing, but perhaps all of us—or almost all of us— stopped doing what was required of us. Some promoted injustice. Others justified it. Others remained silent in the face of it. Others adapted to living with it. Others thought none of it would affect them. Others stopped cultivating sound judgment in the spheres for which they were responsible, thereby weakening the capacity of that collective we call the citizenry to respond—a status that entails an active role in the exercise of rights and duties.⁴

This is not, therefore, about indiscriminately assigning blame or subjecting ourselves to pointless self-flagellation. It is about understanding that a country that does not examine its civic conscience leaves itself exposed to repeating what it has already experienced. Degradation does not begin when the courts cease to serve justice or when dissent is persecuted. It begins earlier, at a more subtle point: when the sense of what is just is lost and those premises that should be firm foundations of life in common are treated as relative.

Educating for democracy means confronting this diagnosis without evasion, undertaking an examination of conscience in order to establish civic responsibilities, and building safeguards against the autocratic potential that may reemerge in the future.

Educating Memory

Without memory—an active memory— there can be no defense against renewed autocratic ambitions. A country that forgets leaves itself unprotected against any attempt to repeat the

4 Julio Borges, “Primero Justicia en la transición hacia la democracia,” lecture delivered at the Raíces Seminar organized by Primero Justicia,

past, because experience fades away, and with it disappear the moral criteria that enable us to distinguish right from wrong and resist evil in the civic life of a people.

Venezuela has too much to remember to allow itself the luxury of amnesia about the nearly three decades of Chavismo, Maduroism, and Rodrigato. Political persecution, imprisonment without due process, forced exile, the fragmentation of families, the transformation of institutions into instruments of control, the theft of elections, and the abduction of popular sovereignty—all of this forms part of an experience that cannot be erased without cost, without moral impoverishment, without political weakening, and without squandering the civic antibodies needed to resist injustice.

But memory does not serve a function of revenge. It serves a function of self-knowledge, of realism in confronting the justice and injustices of which we are capable as a people. It draws a boundary that must not be crossed again, and that boundary must be recognized as such by society as a whole, not only by those who suffered it directly.

Memory makes it possible, specifically, to distinguish between power and abuse, between authority and subjugation, between law and arbitrariness. Without these distinctions, politics loses its moral compass and becomes susceptible to repeating its worst forms, even when the names or circumstances change. For this reason, it is necessary to cultivate what the ancient republican tradition called *horror injustitiae*: not as a rhetorical Latinism, but as a genuine political disposition, as an effective rejection of injustice, arbitrariness, and the violation of rights, without

January 27, 2026, in *Cuadernos Roscio: Ideas de Primero Justicia para la transición. Hacia la Venezuela de la justicia*, vol. I, 2026.

self-serving qualifications or calculations of convenience that distort citizens' moral judgment: abuse must find no justification, arbitrariness must not be tolerated, and the violation of rights must not be normalized.

And at this point, it must be recognized that this kind of disposition does not arise spontaneously. It requires education, transmission, narrative, understanding; it even requires free literary expression.⁵ For memory is not merely the accumulation of facts. It is interpretation, continuity, a way of integrating the past into present consciousness in order to guide the future. But it must also include goodness, the good in history, and the experience of resistance, for not everything was submission: there were those who upheld principles, those who accepted the costs, those who did not yield. Without this dimension, memory would cease to be whole. Evil is not of the race, as Cecilio Acosta once said.⁶

Educating for the Law

Democracy presupposes the law. Without law, what exists is something else, something closer to domination than to order.

In this sense, the Venezuelan crisis has been, to a significant extent, a crisis of legality and of the rule of law.⁷ The law ceased to serve as a reference point for life in common and became an

5 Griselda Guerra, "Escribir y leer desde y sobre una dictadura," *Red Forma*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://red-forma.com/articulo/escribir-y-leer-desde-y-sobre-una-dictadura-griselda-guerra/>

6 Juan Miguel Matheus, "El mal no es de la raza," *La Gran Aldea*, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://lagranaldea.com/2023/05/11/el-mal-no-es-de-la-raza/>

7 Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, "Anomia, Estado y Derecho en Venezuela," *Red Forma*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://red-forma.com/articulo/anomia-estado-y-derecho-en-venezuela-rogelio-perez-perdomo/>

instrument of power. The Constitution was invoked while being stripped of its substance. Legal forms were used to conceal arbitrary decisions and give the appearance of legality to that which lacked it.⁸

This process, common among twenty-first-century autocracies, does not merely destroy institutions. It disrupts public life as a whole, weakens trust, erodes predictability, and leaves citizens exposed to the power of the powerful. It is man being wolf to man...

Restoring democracy therefore entails reestablishing the law as an effective framework for human relations. Not as an ethically neutral positivist formality, but as a limit on power and a guarantee of rights and freedoms. The law protects citizens from power, establishes procedures through which justice can be achieved, and makes it possible to anticipate conduct in civic life. Without it, public life is left at the mercy of decisions that do not respond to stable criteria, but to the shifting whims of arbitrary exercises of power.

But educating for the law does not mean transmitting rules in the abstract. It means cultivating a disposition: the disposition to recognize authority, to follow rules even when they are unfavorable, and to understand that power is not the property of those who exercise it.

8 Juan Miguel Matheus, "El carácter gradual del desmantelamiento del Estado de Derecho en Venezuela," *Red Forma*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://red-forma.com/articulo/el-caracter-gradual-del-desmantelamiento-del-estado-de-derecho-en-venezuela-juan-miguel-matheus/>

In the Venezuelan case, there is a clear point of reference: the 1999 Constitution.⁹ It has been violated, but it has not lost its status as a normative framework. It contains the mechanisms for organizing power, guaranteeing rights, and channeling popular sovereignty.

The problem, then, has not been the absence of a constitutional text, but the absence of its practice —its banalization. For this reason, legal education must descend to the everyday level, to the way even the simplest rules are embraced with a deeper sense of purpose, to the willingness to fulfill obligations, and to the consistency between what one demands of others and what one does oneself. This is where a legal culture begins to be rebuilt.

Educating for Social Justice in Freedom

It is worth recalling that in *Caritas in veritate*,¹⁰ Benedict XVI makes clear that social justice cannot be sustained without freedom, but neither can freedom endure without truth and justice. Each without the other degenerates —either into oppression or into arbitrariness. One of the most delicate tensions in any democracy is at stake here. When concern for social issues is separated from freedom, it becomes a mechanism of control; and when freedom becomes detached from social realities, it loses its civic foundation and legitimacy.

9 Juan Miguel Matheus, “De la fuerza a la ley: la Constitución en la transición democrática,” lecture delivered at the Raíces Seminar organized by Primero Justicia, January 27, 2026, in *Cuadernos Roscio: Ideas de Primero Justicia para la transición. Hacia la Venezuela de la justicia*, vol. I (2026).

10 Benedicto XVI, *Caritas in veritate*. Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009, sec. 6.

The Venezuelan experience has clearly demonstrated the first case: a social discourse used to justify the concentration of power, the creation of dependency, and the neutralization of the autonomy of individuals and families. But democracy requires integrating both dimensions: freedom and social justice.

Educating in this area means reexamining deeply rooted assumptions such as the false dichotomy between the state and capital.¹¹ It means moving beyond the idea that the solution to poverty depends exclusively on the state; recognizing equality before the law; recognizing the dignity of work, education, initiative, and investment, as well as the importance of creating genuine opportunities; and rejecting the use of need as an instrument of control. Assistance has a place as an expression of solidarity, but it cannot become subordination or a mechanism for compelled loyalty. Social justice in freedom requires a demanding balance: avoiding both domination by the state and individualistic indifference on the part of citizens. But that balance cannot be imposed; it must be built. It requires responsibility at different levels—among those who make decisions, those who produce, those who educate, and ordinary citizens. For prosperity—that point of intersection between freedom and social justice—does not arise spontaneously, nor can it be imposed. It is built through an intricate web of rules, efforts, and decisions that must be understood and embraced as such in an effort to shape a people's political culture.

11 Rafael Caldera, “¿Capitalismo de Estado o iniciativa privada?,” *RafaelCaldera.com*, July 30, 1959. <https://rafaelcaldera.com/1959-julio-30-capitalismo-de-estado-o-iniciativa-privada/>

Conclusion

Democracy dies in slow motion. That is what happened in Venezuela. It did not begin with the annihilation of institutions, but with the abandonment of civic spaces, with antipolitics, with tolerance of abuse, and with the enthronement of the idea that power can expand without resistance.

That is why the question now is not merely how to restore democracy. That, relatively speaking, is easy. The challenge is not to empty it of its moral substance once we inaugurate it. And that does not depend on a constitutional provision or a more sophisticated institutional design. It depends on something simpler and more difficult: the integral development of the person and the relationship that citizens establish with power and with justice.¹² If that relationship does not change, everything will be temporary, and autocratic regressions and setbacks in matters of justice will be the order of the day, hanging over republican life like a sword of Damocles. If it does change, everything else can begin to endure over time, through civic effort and sacrifice. What comes next for Venezuela is at stake in this —nothing less, and nothing more.

12 Paola Bautista de Alemán, “Estabilización para la democracia: primera fase de la transición,” lecture delivered at the Raíces Seminar organized by Primero Justicia, January 20, 2026, in *Cuadernos Roscio: Ideas de Primero Justicia para la transición. Hacia la Venezuela de la justicia*, vol. I, 2026.