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What Is Happening to All of Us

“I have a pain here, on the side
of my homeland”

Cristina Peri Rossi

Venezuela is living under a dictatorship. Perhaps saying this in 2026 is not exactly a revelatory statement. We live under a dictatorship, and inflation confirms it; the total amount of external debt tells us that, in addition to living under a dictatorship, Venezuelan society is suffocating under an economic earthquake compounded by the humanitarian and cultural crisis, with the (non)functioning of the healthcare system and the ineffectiveness of the education system. The pieces of that country are obvious evidence that we live under a dictatorship —one that lacks the capacity, whether because of the education of its members, the nature of their ideas, or simply a lack of will, to make the country even remotely functional.

The other pieces of the country are those that cannot be quantified, those that lie beneath the indicators and figures that Chavismo has worked so hard to conceal, even as the social and political sciences have exerted equal effort to name them:

authoritarianism, repression, pax bodegónica,¹ gangster state,² political violence, human rights violations —did I mention dictatorship?

Regardless of what they are called, the common thread running through all these forms of political order is pain, and, as has been seen in the Venezuelan case, it is human, animal, ecological, and spiritual pain. Since at least 2002, taking April 11 of that year as a starting point, Chavismo has developed a capacity for repression by making use of mechanisms embedded within the state as well as other extrastate apparatuses that have been used —initially— to repress those who dissent. But because this proved insufficient to generate social control, that repressive capacity was eventually extended to anyone perceived as opposing the system or anyone who could be useful in sustaining the narrative of the external enemy that has characterized Chavismo since its origin.

If the expansion of education under democracy fostered social mobility and created a robust social fabric, the violence and poverty brought about under Chavismo have likewise spread consistently across all social sectors. This has occurred as most of the institutions of socialization that foster individual and collective development have been hollowed out, both operationally and normatively.

The widespread nature of violence and the crisis by design therefore reveal the Venezuelan state's willingness to cause harm.

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- 1 Raúl Stolk, Tony Frangie Mawad, "Is the Pax Bodegónica Coming to an End?," *Caracas Chronicles*, September 1, 2022. <https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2022/09/01/is-the-pax-bodegonica-coming-to-an-end/>
 - 2 Cfr. Paola Bautista de Aleman, "Tres rasgos del Estado gangsteril en Venezuela", *Revista Democratización*, n. 2, October 2019.

These are not mistakes or excesses. After 27 years, a pattern has become evident that defines the functioning and identity of Chavismo: they exist because they cause harm; they cause harm because they exist.

Pain is not inflicted in the abstract; as a political instrument and means of social control, it constitutes and transforms the lives of its victims. Speaking of a country of victims is not something that naturally empowers them in and of itself. They require coordination and organization in order to be recognized, have their rights restored, and remember their losses. But none of this can happen without acknowledging that this population exists, that they were indeed affected and even erased through the State's actions, omissions, and expediency.

From this perspective, the regeneration of the social fabric must therefore begin with something more fundamental: recovering a *modus vivendi*, that is, the basic elements of coexistence grounded in the revolutionary idea that no one should die for the ideas they defend.

A society organized around pain therefore means not fleeing from it. This may seem counterintuitive, but the widespread presence of victims at different levels and in different manifestations also requires understanding that merely institutional solutions are necessary, but insufficient, to address the diverse forms of suffering that we have experienced as a society during the Chavista dictatorship.

Denialism, revictimization, trivialization, and instrumentalization—which are already beginning to manifest themselves, albeit to a lesser extent, in public discourse—are elements that cannot be comprehensively addressed by policies developed

within the framework of reparation, such as special justice and memory policies.

It is up to us not to flee from pain, but to confront it and learn to live with it in the healthiest way we can, without this entailing a transformation of the political conflict into another form of generating suffering. Otherwise, we will not achieve the cultural transformation of a society that fosters the development of freedoms. To achieve this, we must build ecosystems—that is, interactions based on the recognition of our diverse existences and capacities—that promote cooperation rather than merely negative competition.

That is where the difference with ecosystems lies: they are, rather, a set of highly personal and individual interests. This becomes relevant when we consider that one of the main consequences of the spread of fear and pain throughout Venezuelan society has been isolation. As a result, “sites” of pain are formed, all of which is a planned effect systematically carried out against broad sectors of society.

I have nothing more than my intuition and the pattern that has unfolded over 26 years of dictatorship, repression, and persecution to presume that there is no Venezuelan who has not personally suffered some expression of the crisis, and none of these experiences competes with another. Whether physical, economic, or emotional, pain has an equalizing capacity: it does not establish hierarchies. No one experience makes one person more of a victim than another, makes us more “pure,” or makes us better or worse than others affected by the political crisis.

That hierarchy does, however, risk emerging in the pursuit of justice, insofar as existing disparities in victims' communicative, economic, relational, and other capacities may prove decisive in the face of a weak institutional system. This inequality in the ability to demand and enforce rights falls under the definition of privileges, arising from conditions of origin and accumulation, based on the agency capacities with which victims exercised their lives prior to and following the painful event.

In this way, an inversely proportional relationship emerges between privilege and being a victim: the fewer privileges one enjoys, the greater the risk of experiencing further victimization. This inequality can create a gap that hinders reparation processes and can lead to the instrumentalization of pain, insofar as groups of victims with greater privileges will then gain greater access to the restitution provided through these special justice mechanisms.

The management of memory and reparation where this logic prevails also carries the potential for more privileged actors to conceive of their pain as making them deserving of even more significant political, social, and economic spaces —spaces that have nothing to do with the reparation of the violence perpetrated, in the Venezuelan case, by the State. The persistence of that aspiration is nothing other than resentment, and it cannot be settled publicly, nor should these institutional avenues be used to resolve interests that appear to stem more from an egosystemic aspiration.

Pain in Venezuela today is distributed along a normal curve, and those at its extremes —those who have suffered direct repression, on the one hand, and those who do not even acknowledge it, on the other— must also accompany the process of reparation and memory without promoting denialist practices,

nor, conversely, glorifying victims as martyrs, given that this is a culture that validates itself through tragic death.³

At the same time, centering this conversation on reconciliation and forgiveness would itself constitute a form of revictimization, since these belong to another stage of the process. This is all the more important because these two elements are now becoming part of a narrative originating from those in power, as a means of promoting impunity for those who direct the structures of the Venezuelan State, and from which the fact that forgiveness is a deeply personal act is rejected, despite its public implications, which are decisive for the development of a social pact that fosters freedom.

Ultimately, in defense of the victims, it is their decision whether to offer forgiveness, and for that reason, it is also a privilege that no one may demand of them.

3 Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis Persepolis: The Story of an Iranian Childhood*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2003.