

When Caribbean dream becomes a nightmare

Haiti, the heart of darkness

The land was the black pride: a republic of rebel slaves, free and independent from Napoleon's time. Today is the poorest and least educated country of the western hemisphere. From the brutal dictatorship of the Duvaliers, father and son, to the disturbing ambiguity of "the savior" Aristide, the mystery of the "catastrophe that vegetates" continues

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It takes just a few meters, sometimes, to change the continent. It can be a wall to separate two opposing worlds, as it was in Berlin until 1989. Between Dajabon, Dominican Republic, and Ouanamynthe, Haiti, there is only a bridge over a river, to cross on foot. An insignificant, anonymous bridge, walked by poor people charged with simple things, which creates for a few moments the synthesis of no man's land. But here is Latin America, beyond is Africa. Here, mass tourism, and an antiseptic artificial and crawler paradise; beyond, the heart of darkness, the other side of the coin, the dark side of the Moon.

Haiti is a tension that hurts, an oppression that gets inside you and does not let you go. It is violence and mystery, it is brutal human misery and an incredible sense of religion, it is pride and decadence, a mixture that weighs down Caribbean hot air as the stench of urine pumps up the breath of Port-au-Prince, capital of the "catastrophe that vegetates" (the expression of Céline was used by former President Leslie Manigat).

"The history of Haiti is a history of deep trauma and unhealed wounds". The Apostolic Nuncio of Port-au-Prince, Pierre Christophe, French, tries to get to the root of evil in Haiti and he identifies it with a human drama that becomes cultural drama, a desperate search for identity: "People torn violently from Africa, enslaved in another country, they had to use a language that was not their own, to practice a religion that was not their own, to create a modern society that could not arise from nothing".

Article 4 of the new Constitution (1987) states: "The national motto is *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*". France, mother and stepmother, gives you words and whip, ideas and chains, a schizophrenia of love and hatred that is the cultural DNA of Haiti.

Haitian revolution accompanies French Revolution, in the late eighteenth century.

Robespierre and his partners lose the richest colony because of rebel slaves, which free themselves from the white master, combining his ideas to the energy of Mother Africa. Enlightenment and voodoo. The ancestral rite of the religious leader Bukman forge unity of black people, but it is the political ability of Louverture and the military one of Dessalines to win an impossible challenge: defeated the expeditionary force sent by Napoleon, on January 1, 1804 Haiti declares its independence, the abolition of slavery, the proletarian expropriation of French settlers' lands.

The last became the first, the history anticipates itself many decades, the small Caribbean island is "the lighthouse of Latin America", the birthplace of Pan-Americanism: Simon Bolivar pass through Haiti before starting independence wars in Venezuela.

Too early to be true. The promise of the future that Haiti furiously ripped, by bare hands, is like a curse, the sentence to look for a modernity that never comes. Schizophrenia of the culture, suspended between imitation and rejection of European model, quickly turns into a dualism of unprecedented proportions: the class of slaves already freed or partially emancipated at the time of independence, formed by a majority of mulattoes, becomes a wealthy and reactionary elite. It is a *rentiers* class, devoted to trade with foreign countries, living in seaside town, and being totally dependent on European first, on Americans later (Haiti experiences in advance the typical "unequal exchange" of modern neo-colonialism: raw materials and agricultural products at fixed prices, prohibitively expensive imported manufactured goods). These educated and refined bourgeois bordering on the whim, speak French, they are good Catholics and they look with

contempt the overwhelming majority of poor illiterate peasants, who only speak Creole and more or less openly practice voodoo.

Haitian peasants are obsessed by the desire to work never again for someone else: since the independence they have become small owners, and they move decisively towards subsistence farming or so, developing a strong sense of community, of micro-solidarity. They are the good soul of the nation, but it inevitably turns down, accentuating the isolation and promoting the process of marginalization (except for some revolt attempts, as in 1843) provided by city merchants. The hinge between these two worlds (actually, the guard dog of the privileged classes) is the army, the pillar of Haitian duality.

Modernization attempts are brave (and enforced even with ferocity), but unrealistic, because the result of isolated personalistic experiences, which border on megalomania. The most impressive is that of King Christophe, who became for a short period the "enlightened" despot of Cap-Haitien and the Northern Kingdom. Inspired by Frederick II of Prussia, this former baker becoming monarch built his "*Palais Sans Souci*" in the forest and "*La Citadelle Ferrière*", mastodontic fortress armed with cannons taken away from Napoleon, on top of the mountain. For Haitians it is the eighth wonder of the world, for Unesco a World Heritage Site: for the very few visitors, the symbol of the island desperate pride.

King Christophe wanted to bring English language, the Anglo-Saxon civilization, the Protestant religion to keep the country moving with the times. His attempt failed miserably, as the one of the dictator Salomon, a typical positivist Latin American *caudillo*, just like "order and progress", who brought the telegraph in Haiti and established the National Bank at the end of the nineteenth century.

The absolutely socially unscrupulous ruling classes stood out against any change, prolonging indefinitely the status quo. For rich Haitians, that was the natural order of things ordained by God. So, with the impetuous population growth in the early twentieth century, Haiti sadly starts his destiny as underdeveloped country. Agricultural production does not increase enough, exports of coffee (one of the world's best quality), of rum and sugar decrease, the poor begin to migrate and the Republic of Haiti also suffers the humiliation of U.S. Marines invasion in 1915 and American occupation to ensure the payment of debts to Washington ("dollar diplomacy").

The various dictatorships alternate until 1957, when a country doctor, an expert on the problems of farmers, wins the elections by appealing to wounded pride of blacks and to their resentment to mulattoes who control the country. The doctor's name is François Duvalier, and he will be famous throughout the world with the nickname of "Papa Doc".

Duvalier wanted to get blacks and farmers in Haitian society, according to an authoritarian fascist and national-populist model. In a few years he can establish a strict control over the army, ensure the power thanks to his personal militia, the infamous "*Tontons Macoutes*", arriving everywhere and terrorizing the population. In 1964 he is appointed president for life, and reveals his monstrous face of dictator. Kennedy hated him, but Americans continued to support him for his anti-communism, which had in fact nothing ideological (Fidel Castro himself did not know exactly how to consider him).

Haitian society does not make headway: the social repair is done only thanks presidential favoritism. The lists of university students are compiled directly into the National Palace, the beneficiaries are almost exclusively loyal to "Papa Doc".

When he died in 1971, he was succeeded by his nineteen year old son Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc"), a small despot oppressed by a greedy wife. Despite the official legitimation by Washington and Paris and a relative openness to the outside, the rotten decadence of the regime jogs on like a zombie until 1986.

The civil disorders break out with devastating force, surprising a government that had lost all contact with civil society. The bloody attempts of repression are useless: the revolt is a river that seems to sweep everything away.

Apparently, a sudden revolution. Actually, the wind of change blown in Haiti for years: it was called liberation theology, and it had permeated the whole Catholic Church at the grassroots level, "the

petite église", true protagonist of the end of Duvalier. The young priests from the suburbs and countryside were now completely disconnected from the Vatican. "The "preferential option for the poor" becomes a revolutionary message, almost Marxist radicalism, spread by increasingly politicized priests.

It is in this context that the irresistible parable of Jean Bertrand Aristide is created.

Aristide is a young Salesian priest, the son of a poor peasant family in a village south of Port au Prince. He has considerable intellectual gifts, a solid basic training and an extraordinary eloquence. He is a charismatic leader of great impact, a kind of messiah for an exasperated people, who love viscerally the word, the myth, the emotional component of the politics. Aristide can touch like anyone else the deep chords of Haitian hearts. "You can not meet Aristide without loving him", says Father Jacques Charles, SDB, director of the "*Fondation Vincent pour l'Agriculture*", "I knew him during theological education in Israel, in 1981: a great communicator, he wrote for the newspaper *La Bonne Nouvelle* and worked on the radio. He stays gentle in manner, but the politics changed him".

Aristide comes to the fore in 1990, at the end of the very turbulent first phase transition managed by soldiers. The first democratically elected president under the new Constitution of 1987 was Leslie Manigat, a university professor highly regarded abroad, returned to Haiti after twenty years of exile, and overthrown by a military coup after a few months of presidency. Manigat is prevented from running to the presidential election (triumphantly won by Aristide) with an absurd pretext by the Provisional Electoral Council, a key organ for the management of power in Haiti. Aristide, the leader of a movement that does not have a real party structure, wants to re-establish Haitian society. He appoints Prime Minister Rene Preval, he asks France for the extradition of Jean Claude Duvalier, the military leadership changes.

Aristide's proclaims let you know that a joyous daybreak is beginning for Haiti, after so much violence. The media all over the world talk about the new Caribbean leader. The CIA defines him as psychologically dangerous, a kind of megalomaniac communist. The Salesians have already expelled him from the order, and soon Aristide will get a priestly dispensation to marry. New Haitian course lasts only a few months. At the end of 1991 a coup led by General Raoul Cédras forced Aristide into exile in the United States.

For three years, Haiti live in an international isolation. President Clinton wants to "restore democracy in Haiti" and imposes harsh penalties. Cédras' military junta is besieged, it can nothing against American giant that, at the end of 1994, once again sends its marines to invade the island, and causes the return of Aristide to the presidency. It is a smooth transition, as spectacular in form as ambiguous in substance: the coup leaders get a general "honorable retreat" and go into voluntary (and golden) exile in Panama. Everything is so easy to suggest a play-acting: according to the former president Manigat (see interview) the army has never challenged the Pentagon's directives in the history of Haiti.

The army is disbanded, deleted without a fight. Aristide decides not to "recuperate" the three years spent in exile and let his man of confidence, Preval, win hands down (87 percent of the votes) the 1996 presidential elections, boycotted by the other parties (which had already rejected to participate in general elections of 1995), because the Provisional Electoral Council, which manages the consultation, is in the hands of the President's Men.

Since then the situation is stagnant. Aristide has founded his own personal party, the "*Fanmi Lavalas*" (in Creole "Avalanche Family"), which operates as a foundation outside the institutions, managing public contracts, cooperatives, social initiatives. In parliament there are already men tied to Aristide in his original movement OPL ("*Organisation Politique Lavalas*") who now have distanced themselves, under the leadership of the Communist Pierre Charles. And the parliament came into conflict with President Préval, who said it expired. A surreal political situation. But "in Haiti the power is always somewhere else", says the apostolic nuncio.

While at an official level they debate about constitutional right, the political battle is in the streets, with threats, intimidation, murders. Behind the scenes, Aristide controls the game of power, providing money of doubtful origin and a manpower of supporters ready to violence.

A frustrated journalist for the independent newspaper "*Le Matin*", Clarens Fortune, 37, argues that "democracy works only for supporters of Aristide. The *Tontons Macoutes* of Duvalier have been replaced by *zenglendo*, young criminals linked to Aristide, who run the cocaine trade. They are the ones who burned the newspaper I worked for earlier".

The followers of Aristide get rid of every accusation as a calumny of the nostalgic for Duvalier privileged people. Their leader denounces every day American plot and the one of the vampires of the International Monetary Fund. There are many good reasons for these accusations, but the anti-Americanism of Aristide sounds rather hypocritical. In any case, without international aid, and especially without emigrants' remittances, Haiti would have already blown up.

In the streets of Port-au-Prince people's frustration is palpable. The electricity comes and goes, like running water. Unemployment is very high, widespread poverty, illiteracy about 60 percent of the population. Looks full of hatred defy the very few white people running around here, looking for an impossible justification to such a misery, made even more unbearable by the disproportionate number of luxury cars (especially SUVs) that roam the capital.

In a country that produces almost nothing (apart from some American manufacturing industry of total labor exploitation) this displayed opulence is really disconcerting. According to the journalists of "*Matin*" they are the same old merchants (indicated by an American newspaper MRE "Most Repugnant Elite"), which impose foreign products without price controls or taxation, choking the already poor local production (now Haiti imports even bananas from Santo Domingo).

The "*nouveaux riches*", the corrupt politicians of Lavalas (and Aristide himself) and cocaine dealers, which passes more and more from Colombia to Haiti toward Florida, joined them. The rural disaster is also urban: the steady exodus of young people to the cities does not stop the wild deforestation, going on with world record pace (forests decrease every year by 5 per cent). The creeping anarchy could break out before 2001 presidential election. But alternatively the country process of democratization may accelerate. "Haitians have to retrace their roots, the message of voodoo, which is that of sharing, of brotherly love". Fabrice Charmant is a young author of documentaries on Haiti's traditional religion, which he practices. He reject Americanization of his contemporaries, and he is looking for that inner strength that allowed its ancestors to rebel against a destiny of servitude. In his words the invocation of the beautiful film about African slavery in America "Sankofah" echo: "Spirit of the dead people, rise again; spirit of the dead people break our chains..."

Cesare Sangalli

Meeting with former President Leslie Manigat

Try again, Prof

He was in Duvalier 's jails in the sixties. Exiled for over twenty years, he returned to Haiti in a dramatic moment and joined the fray immediately, becoming the first head of state elected by the new Constitution. He suffered a coup that ended his brief career as president of the republic. Leslie Manigat, born in 1930, has the appearance of a man who has already been exposed to the elements of life. Brilliant professor of history of international relationship, he taught in Paris, the United States, Trinidad and Venezuela, where he founded in 1979, the "*Rassemblement des Démocrates Nationaux Progressistes*" (RDNP), a sort of center-left Christian Democratic Party. A high cultured citizen of the world, but also a Haitian who deeply loves his country. He could be the real alternative to Jean Bertrand Aristide in 2001. The choice would be very clear, not only politically, but even anthropologically: the "old" versus the "young", the intellectual against the communicator, the staid old-fashioned politician, loyal to the Constitution, versus the fiery people's leader acclaimed by the masses.

More explicitly, peaceful democracy versus violent demagoguery.

Q- How was the myth of Aristide born?

A- The -myth of Aristide comes from an altered perception of reality. It was believed (we wanted to believe) that Haiti was the Lavalas party, namely to identify a country with a leader. Reality was different: Lavalas was only the strongest party at that time. Take Aristide's election: the majority of the country was not with him. It is true, his popularity was enormous, but it was not a plebiscite. Suffice to say that on the elections Sunday, Aristide was declared winner when the votes counting had not yet begun, by a crowd of 300 thousand people in front of the National Palace. On Monday morning, with the polls even closed, France Presse agency reported that Aristide was the new president with 67 percent of the vote. And this impression was continuously amplified by the media.

Q- Just like Aristide's return, Americans bring Democracy back to Haiti...

A – A farce, a play-acting strongly desired by Clinton to emphasize the U.S. role in the defense of democracy. We were favorable to Aristide's return, but without invasion of a foreign army. Believe me, I suffered a coup: Haitian soldiers have never lifted a finger without the consent of the Pentagon.

Q – The image of Aristide is mysterious, fascinating and disturbing at the same time. Who is really Jean Bertrand Aristide?

A- Aristide is a historic case. He represents the problem of the excluded people of this country that finally comes to the surface. He was originally a genuine neoliberal, a priest who embraced liberation theology, a man who embodies (as a personal story) a matter of popular demand. But among the various politics options, Aristide chose a populism with a strong anarchist tendency. It is an approach that allows him to get over his political inability, the absence of a genuine reformist project. The nebula represented by his movement, Fanmi Lavalas, without a real organization, lets him to act as he sees fit, at any time.

Q-Do you think power changed him?

A-Doubtless. But maybe he only showed his dark side, present from the beginning. The poor became rich: Aristide is now the only candidate to have significant financial resources (and money matters a lot in a poor country, for political purposes). The passionate politician became a cynical Machiavellian manipulator. And finally, the priest turned into a criminal monster.

Q-How do you see the future of his country?

A-The present moment is dramatic: we are moving towards the political implosion, social explosion and bloody anarchy. Haiti is a Gordian knot to be cut once and for all. There are two possible scenarios: or the now sleeping dictatorship establishes itself and consolidates with the re-election of Aristide in 2001; or there can be the chance of creating a pluralist democracy. Right now the first scenario is unfortunately the most likely, because we are already living, with the ousted Parliament, a dictatorship of-fact, led by Aristide behind the scenes . Because Aristide is rich and still has a certain charisma, because people are afraid and the international community has no clear and rigorous policy. The democratic alternative can however enjoy the same and opposite factors: the popularity of Aristide is falling. The king is naked now, Haitians say it clearly, talking freely on popular radio. The intellectuals, who had supported him, now distanced themselves and the international community itself become more and more critical against him. Aristide is isolating himself. Am I going to run for elections? Only if there are conditions for a real democratic competition, guaranteed by international observers.