

Light and shade of a nation that "dribbled" globalization

The slow Tango of Uruguay *A different country, proud of its diversity. Almost an European outpost in America. An idyllic past, tainted by the violence of the Tupamaros and especially the state terrorism in the long night of dictatorship. Uruguay quietly avoided the failures of globalization, but it has not yet healed its wounds*

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"Uruguay? A divine country, but you are not paid to be divine". The angry synthesis is of an unemployed person who wants to let off steam in a bar in Montevideo.

We are in European summer, that is right the austral winter here: Uruguay's capital languishes in the rain or the discrete sun that comes from Rio de la Plata, a climate that enhances its charm and melancholy. The inevitable comparison is with its neighboring Argentina, with majestic Buenos Aires standing across the river, in all its arrogance brought to its knees by the devastating crisis of recent years.

In comparison Montevideo looks like a small modest and humble town, in the old part of the area surrounding the port, with cold winds sweeping the Atlantic that could resemble a waterfront Malecon in Havana, it seems desolate and absolutely not touristic. The superficial traveler seems to be invited to leave, with few images and no special memory.

And yet. Montevideo is an one hundred percent "female" city, it is slow, sinuous, passionate and elusive. In a word, it is magical. It seduces you in a hug as long as a tango, which probably was born here, and not in Argentina.

Space and time change, because there is nothing American or South American, here, and the rhythms are so quiet. Uruguay is officially called "*Republica Oriental del Uruguay*", and in the adjective "*oriental*", the mystery is explained: Uruguay always looks at Europe, and it could also be considered the most advanced flap of the Old Continent to West. A little like Argentina, but much more and much better than Argentina.

Beyond the literary charm of a city, of a deeply humanist country of great culture, there are strong historical and political reasons to explain the "exception Uruguay", its irreducible diversity.

First of all, this is an area of Latin America neglected by Spanish conquistadors: no mineral resource, nor the gold and silver that attracted European adventurers, only so much, almost uninhabited land, pastures as far as the eye can see that attracted to a single activity: farming. Certainly "gauchos" were not tender with few present Amerindians, but in substance there was not the clash of civilizations that elsewhere marked South America history: Uruguayans, like Argentinians, can be defined, according to the scheme of Brazilian sociologist Darcy Ribeiro, "transplanted peoples", unlike "witness peoples" (descendants of the representatives of pre-Columbian civilizations) and "new peoples" (a fusion of African, European and indigenous ethnic matrices). No coincidence that a popular saying states that "Mexicans come from Aztecs, Peruvians from Incas, Argentinians from ships".

Uruguay was actually part of the Vice-royalty of Rio de la Plata, one of the four major colonial Spanish areas, and it could simply be a province of Argentina, or otherwise come under the domination of Brazil. But no.

From the beginning, this small, untamed country struggled against the two giants, and against the two giants it defined its own identity all of its own, although at a superficial glance, the similarities with Argentina may look beyond the differences.

Even in soccer, Uruguay was able to enter into history, astounding Europeans first, with the double Olympic success in the twenties in Paris and Amsterdam, then just Argentinians and Brazilians (world titles in 1930 and 1950).

And since independence in 1825, Uruguay has actually split into two factions of the irreducible

opponents, the protagonists of the entire political history of the country to this day.

Two souls, two geographies, two social classes: the city (Montevideo) against the almost wild inland; traders, professionals and scholars against the proud landed oligarchy with its armed wing, the "gauchos", proud libertarian and violent stockmen.

The cosmopolitan, international mentality of the sea city, that England wanted as a rich valve for its import-export, against the harsh nationalism of who lived thanks to land and put his country and the traditional identity first of any foreign pressure. You can call them liberals and conservatives, here called *Colorados* and *Blancos*, and they made the war at the time of Garibaldi. The hero of two worlds fought on Rio de la Plata against the attempt of annexation by Argentina, and then he sided with Liberals in Montevideo, called "*Colorados*" because their flags were red. The two political factions have characterized the entire history of Uruguay until now. However "*Colorados*" were winners of the civil war.

Their modernist vision fitted perfectly with that of Victorian splendor England in the late nineteenth century: Uruguay exported meat and wools for British manufacturing industries, which in turn built the infrastructure necessary for the second industrial revolution. Namely, rail, ships, but also the first refrigerators for preserving meat, and even Liebig industry to get the meat extract.

The twentieth century opened with the New, on Rio de la Plata British football began to be practiced earlier than in other European countries, and a *colorado* president, José Batlle y Ordóñez, was able to ride the economic progress towards a strong and modern welfare state, the first (and practically only) across the continent (1903-1907).

Working hours to eight hours, unemployment benefit, funding to agriculture, pension system for all workers, and especially compulsory free and non-denominational education.

Uruguay opened its doors to immigrants, it knew how to integrate them better than any other countries in the world. More than a country, a miracle, considering the geographical environment and historical period. Montevideo established a tradition of the city open to all ideas, great little refuge for anarchists, political exiles, unpopular intellectuals at home, with a strong Masonic presence and a large, cultured Jewish community.

Thus, the small South American nation itself is already in the first half of last century, an oasis of freedom, social harmony and economic development in a tragically backward continent (as Uruguay inaugurates its welfare state, there is still slavery, even if not officially).

But in the late fifties, Cuban revolution inflames the minds throughout Latin America, especially in nationalist key: the former "USA brothel" became a symbol of redemption from Yankee imperialism, and the concrete demonstration that the revolutionary utopia can win even at these latitudes.

Communism was seen until then as an European construction, a bit abstract for Latin American reality, more valuable as a tool of intellectual inspiration than as a means for changing reality. With Fidel Castro's revolutionary dream seems all but ready for implementation. "Cuban Revolution - British historian Eric Hobsbawm writes - had everything: romantic spirit, heroism in the mountains, former student leaders with the selfless generosity of their youth (the oldest just passed the age of thirty), a people rejoicing in tourism tropical paradise pulsing to the rhythm of rumba". And yet, Ernesto "Che" Guevara in person, during a visit at the University of Montevideo in 1961, admonished Uruguayan youth: Uruguay needed no revolution, because it was already an advanced democracy, with greater standards of justice and social equity.

It is difficult, even after many years, figuring out how one of the most formidable and innovative groups of armed struggle was formed, destined to be a model for all European terrorist formations in the seventies. No one knows why the Tupamaros were born, a name that is engraved in the collective memory of the world. One thing is certain: you had never seen anything like this before. Cuban revolution, and every other Latin American guerrillas, were born in rural areas, in the mountains and forests of inland, the guerrillas fought to push out the *campesinos* from their misery, they struggled against authoritarian regimes that left no room for the democratic process. In Uruguay there was nothing like that.

Tupamaros were the first case of urban warfare, carried out by young people (average age did not

exceed 25 years) from middle and lower middle class, integrated by officials and teachers, with very few workers and virtually none of the rural areas.

A dual identity, normal people by day, "Tupamaros" at night. Even if they are constantly inspired by Marxism-Leninism, the ideology was never overwhelming, and the political line rather confusing. Among Tupamaros were many components: the traditional and the anarchist left wing and former "blancos" nationalist, post-conciliar Catholics, and even outright adventurers.

There was originally not a proper analysis of Uruguayan society, nor a coherent revolutionary project, as Alfonso Lessa explained in his book "*La Revolución imposible*".

The real glue was the irresistible allure of violence, the glorification of armed struggle of the brave acts. "Revolutionary narcissism needs, in a visceral way, as part of its identity, situations of violence. Suffered violence and practiced violence. Heroism and martyrdom". So writes Pablo Giussani, a former militant of the Montoneros, Peronist guerrillas "twin" of the Tupamaros. The mystery was part of the charm that Tupamaros exerted on a considerable part of Uruguayan society in the first phase.

Since 1963, a strange five-pointed star, with a "T" in the center, began to appear on the walls of Montevideo. In following years winter nights, a group of young people patiently and carefully explored the sewer system of capital: it would have been the secret way of spectacular operations in the years to come.

The first operations date back to 1967, and they reach exceptional escalation within a month. Like Robin Hood and Arsène Lupin, Tupamaros attacked and ransacked the symbols of capitalism and the USA: from the Casino in Punta del Este to the headquarters of General Motors.

They strike with genius and daring, in a clean way, without a victim: then they are able to redistribute the stolen money to sugar cane growers. They explain in their verbose bulletin the logic of their shots. They point to a radicalization of the conflict, which in their view is the prelude of the revolution.

The answer is soon to come, President Pacheco begins to take extraordinary measures to govern by force emptying the role of Parliament. Everyone are making a game bigger than that they can effort. Yet "Che" was explicit, a few years earlier: "We started on the path of armed struggle, a very sad, very painful path, that sowed the dead throughout the country, when we could not do anything else. When you start with the first shot, you never know when there will be the last " They go from things to people: Tupamaros specialize themselves in kidnapping for the moment being in exchange for money. Then trials to the kidnapped people start, the useless justice rite of people courts. The sentence is already written: death.

While Tupamaros alienate the remaining people sympathies, certainly the United States are not still. Their strategy is smart and ruthless, the various guerrillas only offer a splendid legitimacy, but the real goal is to prevent the advance of the Socialist-inspired Left throughout the continent (the case of Allende's Chile is a brutal demonstration of this politics: and when the moment of truth arrives, Chilean president will be lonely, "betrayed" by extremists who also left him sunk and they do not move a finger to defend him).

The two parables (the increasingly blind violence of Tupamaros and the strategy of repression of Washington) come together perfectly in 1970, with the kidnapping of American embassy official Dan Mitrione (the event that inspired the film by Costa Gravas "State of siege"). The man is actually a CIA agent specializing in so-called *contrainsurgencia*. Among his duties, instructing Uruguayan police and military to the best torture techniques. After a long imprisonment, Mitrione is killed. The episode marks a turning point: Tupamaros want to raise the bar, looking for direct clash against the army, which, until then, had been only marginally involved. The Army, especially the U.S. one, do not expect a better opportunity.

Within two years Tupamaros are smitten, while in Uruguay the rule of law has made shameful step backwards, in front of the uniforms dominance provided by the continuing emergency measures. When soldiers closed the parliament, June 27, 1973, the coup kills an already moribund democracy. Tupamaros did not provoke a coup (they were already militarily defeated a year earlier), but they have helped, not so paradoxically, the murderers and torturers of state.

Uruguay went in the long night of military dictatorship, eleven years of shame.

Thirty years later, the politicians do not seem to explain why. The hasty parliamentary debate, in an almost empty room, defends the general reasons of democracy, reiterating that what happened must not happen again, someone dares to speak of "complicity" of Uruguayan society sectors, strangely no one speak of the army and the United States. At times like these, the entire Uruguayan political class seems ill with the practice of involving the opposition in government through a series of compromises and the self-referentiality. The historical responsibility, however, can not possibly be equally allocated.

Colorados are undoubtedly the most offenders, now in power with President Jorge Batlle, another scion of the country's most important political families. The presidents Pacheco first and Bordaberry then, increasingly involved soldiers in the management of public affairs, with the illusion of control them.

The eternal rivals, Blancos, can boast one of the fiercest opponents of the regime at the time, Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, their leader, and they were the last to accept the painless (for military) exit from dictatorship. But they accepted a "historic compromise" with opponents of the Colorado party. The odd man out remains, the party of the joined lefts called Frente Amplio, the greatest victims of the coup. Frente Amplio, at the time of the coup, had just appeared on the national political scene, and represented the alternative left-wing to the tired two-party struggle between liberals and conservatives. In thirty years it has become the biggest party of Uruguay, in alliance with the harder left of Encuentro Progresista and recycling the former Tupamaros (a Latin American classic), but it fails to arrive to the government because of the strange alliance between Blancos and Colorados, (even though for years it triumphs at the elections in Montevideo, while it is still weak in the rural inland of the country).

Uruguayan people drew back frightened by a violence that was not covered at all in their DNA in the seventies. Maybe too wealthy to be martyrs, definitely the victim of the game of who command (especially the CIA, which also kept a "low profile" for small Uruguay). Unlucky the land that needs heroes.

However, for the first appointment with the ballot boxes, namely the referendum called by the army in 1980 to legitimize and perpetuate the scheme, Uruguayans, despite the climate of terror, responded with a flat refusal (which did not change anything at the moment). The return to democracy was neither fast nor very honorable. It was an operation carried out from above, after the dictatorial regimes in Argentina and Brazil (1984-85) had already finished. As if to remove the past, in another referendum in 1989, it passed the amnesty law for all crimes committed by the army in the eleven years of dictatorship.

But, as they say in a movie, "we can close with the past, but the past does not close with us". And here is the re-emergence, through the courts, of the case of Juan Carlos Blanco, a former senator of Partido Colorado, implicated in teacher Elena Quinteros' murder by death squads of the regime.

It is the signal that Uruguay needs to change, renew the political class and eventually drive out the old opposition Blancos and Colorados. Because peace sometimes degenerates into decay, and even the left needs a good shake (perhaps finally taking the government from next year's elections). Uruguay is slowly recovering from a devastating economic crisis. If you think that the country is certainly less rich than Argentina, you understand that the old statist and welfarist model (Uruguay, never went through a period of privatization), with its many deficits, sustained the brunt of the crisis better than modernist hyper-liberal Argentina of Menem. However, unemployment remains more than 20 percent, inflation at 45 percent, a dramatic regression of the GDP of 10 percent (lower than only Argentina across the continent).

It is the other side, the more hidden of Uruguay melancholy. That can become sometimes almost desperate sadness. In this, deeply Latin America, so subtly linked to the light and to darkness.

The most beautiful commemoration of the thirty years of the coup, did not happen either in parliament or in the newspapers, but in a small exhibition of the Goethe Institute, scarcely advertised, and able to hit in the stomach as only art can do. It was called *Palabras silenciosas*, from the verses of a 21 years old Peruvian poet named Javier Heraud, killed as a guerrilla.

"SILENT WORDS / ... And the poetry is / a wonderful lightning, a rain of silent words / a forest of beats and hope ... / ... And then the poem is, / love, death/ man redemption".

Cesare Sangalli