The white curse

On the first day of this year, freedom in this world turned 200. But no-one noticed, or almost no-one. A few days later the country where this birth occurred, Haiti, found itself in the media spotlight. Not for the anniversary of universal freedom but because there had been a bloodbath that culminated in the ousting of President Aristide. Haiti was the first country to abolish slavery. However, almost all encyclopedias and textbooks attribute this honourable deed to England. It is true that one fine day the empire that had been the champion in the slave trade changed its mind. But abolition in Britain took place in 1807, three years after the Haitian Revolution, and it was so unconvincing that in 1832 Britain had to ban slavery again.

There is nothing new about this plight of Haiti. For two centuries it has suffered scorn and punishment. Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner and champion of liberty at the same time, warned that Haiti had created a bad example and argued it was necessary to ‘confine the plague to the island’. His country heeded him. It was 60 years before the US granted diplomatic recognition to this freest of nations. Meanwhile, in Brazil, disorder and violence came to be called ‘haitianism’. It was not until 1888 that Brazil abolished slavery – the last country in the world to do so.

Since its revolution, Haiti has been capable only of mounting tragedies. Once a happy and prosperous colony, it is now the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. Revolutions, certain specialists have concluded, lead straight to the abyss. Others have hinted that the Haitian tendency to fratricide derives from its savage African heredity. The rule of the ancestors. The curse that engenders crime and chaos.

Of the white curse nothing was said.

The French Revolution had abolished slavery, but Napoleon revived it. To reestablish slavery in Haiti, France sent more than 500,000 troops of soldiers. The country’s blacks rose up and defeated France and won national independence and freedom for the slaves. In 1804, they inherited a land that had been razed to make sugar cane plantations and consumed by civil war. And they inherited ‘the French debt’. France made Haiti pay dearly for the humiliation it inflicted on Napoleon. The newly born nation had to pay a gigantic indemnification for the damage it had caused in winning its freedom: 150 million gold francs, the equivalent of 21.7 billion in today’s dollars, or 44 times Haiti’s current yearly budget. It took far more than a century to pay off the debt, which ballooned with monstrous interest rates. Finally in 1938 Haiti made the last payment.

In exchange for this fortune, France officially recognized the new nation. No other countries did so. Haiti was born condemned to solitude.

Not even Simon Bolívar recognized Haiti, though he owed it everything. In 1816 it was Haiti that furnished Bolívar with boats, arms and soldiers when he showed up defeated and asking for shelter and help. Haiti gave him everything with one condition: that he free the slaves – an idea that had not occurred to him until then. The great man triumphed in his war of independence and showed his gratitude by sending a sword as a gift to Port-au-Prince. Of recognition he made no mention.

In reality the Spanish colonies that had become independent countries continued to allow slavery, although some had laws against it. Bolívar proclaimed his own such law in 1821 but news of it didn’t travel far. In 1851, 30 years later, Colombia abolished slavery. Venezuela followed suit in 1854.

In 1915 the US Marines landed in Haiti. They stayed 19 years. The first thing they did was occupy the customs house. The occupying army suspended the salary of the Haitian President until he agreed to sign off on the liquidation of the Bank of the Nation, which became a branch of Citibank of New York. The President and other blacks were barred entry into the private hotels, restaurants and clubs of the foreign occupying power. The occupiers didn’t dare re-establish slavery but they did impose forced labour for the building of public works. And they killed a lot of people. It wasn’t easy to quell the fires of resistance. The guerrilla chief, Charlemagne Peralte, was exhibited in the public square, crucified on a door to teach the people a lesson.

This civilizing mission ended in 1934. The occupiers withdrew, having created a National Guard to exterminate any possible trace of democracy. They did the same in Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. A short time after, Duvalier became Haiti’s equivalent of Somoza and Trujillo.

And so, from dictator to dictator, from promise to betrayal, one misfortune followed another.

Aristide, the rebel priest, became president in 1991. He lasted a few months before the US helped to oust him, took him, subjected him to a certain treatment, and then sent him back in the arms of Marines to resume his post. Then, again in 2004, the US helped to remove him from power, and yet again there was killing. And yet again the Marines came back, as they always seem to, like the flu.

But the international experts are far more destructive than invading troops. Placed under strict orders from the World Bank and the IMF, Haiti obeyed every instruction, even if it meant there would be neither bread nor salt. The Government’s credit was frozen; the subsidies and tariffs that had protected national production were eliminated. Rice farmers, once the majority, soon became beggars or boat people. Many have ended in the depths of the Caribbean; only these shipwreck victims aren’t Cuban, so their plight never makes the papers.

Today, Haiti imports all of its rice from the US where international experts, who are either distracted people, forgot to prohibit tariffs and subsidies.

On the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, there is a large sign that reads: ‘Road to Ruin’. On the other side is the black hell. Blood and hunger, misery and disease. In this much-feared hell, everyone is a sculptor. Haitians collect tin cans and scrap metal that they cut and shape and hammer with old-world mastery, creating marvels that are sold in the street markets.

Haiti is a country that has been thrown away, as an eternal punishment of its dignity. There it lies, like scrap metal. It avoids the hands of its people.

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