

h ä i e

Haiti

Reading the Minds of Democracy

h ä i e

C. WALTER

& GERDA B.

MORTENSON

CENTER FOR

INTERNATIONAL

LIBRARY

PROGRAMS

Haiti

EIGHTH ANNUAL

MORTENSON

DISTINGUISHED

LECTURE

Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to present to you the eighth annual C. Walter and Gerda B. Mortenson Distinguished Lecture, delivered on November 12, 1997, by Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis, Executive Director of the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute in Haiti, FOKAL (Fondasyon Konesans Ak Libete/Fondation Connaissance et Liberté).

A graduate of the Sorbonne, Ms. Pierre-Louis has spent the last 20 years in her native Haiti working with a variety of grassroots organizations to build civil society. In 1991 she was a consultant to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on government structure and land reform. A major thrust of her work has been to promote literacy. In 1993 Japan's Yoko Tada Foundation for Human Rights awarded her its Human Rights Prize. Currently she is executive director of the Fondation Connaissance et Liberté, the Soros Foundation in Port-au-Prince. I am proud to say that the Mortenson Center is working with this foundation on a project to train Haitian librarians.

In "Haiti: Reading the Minds of Democracy" Ms. Pierre-Louis reflects on Haiti's difficult history, the heavy burden of illiteracy, and the importance of libraries and education for the country's future.

Marianna Tax Choldin
Director, Mortenson Center for
International Library Programs and
Mortenson Distinguished Professor

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank the C. Walter and Gerda B. Mortenson Center for International Library Programs for having invited me to be the guest speaker at the Eighth Annual Mortenson Distinguished Lecture. My thanks go especially to Marianna Tax Choldin, Mortenson Distinguished Professor, Susan Schnuer, Coordinator of the Mortenson Center, and Robert Wedgeworth, Director of the Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I also want all the members of the Mortenson family who were able to attend the lecture to know how much I appreciate their presence here tonight. To my colleague Lorraine Mangones, coordinator of programs at the Fondation Connaissance et Liberté, to the Haitian team of librarians who are also here with us and who seem so enthusiastic about their training at the Mortenson Center, I also extend my thanks for their trust and their support.

Reading the minds of democracy

I would like to begin by relating to you a few experiences which will, for a while, draw your attention away from the stereotypes of wretchedness and squalor and the well-publicized indicators of abject poverty and illiteracy that are commonly used to describe Haiti. As noted by Sidney Mintz in *Caribbean Transformation*, "Few countries in modern times have received so bad a press from foreign observers as Haiti." The purpose of my lecture is to show that profound mutations are shaking the foundations of Haitian society today. The newly enfranchised population is claiming its rights to participate in the *res publica*. At the core of its search for democracy is a powerful demand for education and justice. The question is, how long will the weight of the past constitute an impediment to real emancipation and constructive development?

The allegory of the cave

A few years ago, I decided to teach philosophy to a group of peasants in the Central Plateau, an isolated region mostly known for its economic misfortunes and for its history of resistance movements against arbitrary rule. An incongruous idea indeed! Who in her right mind would come up with such a singular project: to spend time discussing Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, Hegel and Marx with illiterate peasants whose mental universe was thought to be so narrow and unfit for learning? And yet what an exceptional experience it was. I became so engrossed in my work that I lost track of time and did not foresee the political events that were to put an end to our philosophical adventure. I still remember the excitement when we discussed Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," and even today, as I speak to you, I still see pairs of eyes glowing with attention and interest when I read Socrates' comments to Glaucon:

Our own account signifies that the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with; and that, just as one might have to turn the whole body round in order that the eye should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eyes can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendour which we have called the Good.

Such words struck a vivid echo in the minds of people who had been forever marginalized and who had to contemplate the effects of darkness in their own environment. Never in their lives had they been exposed to the mysteries of books, except for the Bible which they could not read anyway. And now they were trying to figure out how to measure the depth of words written more than two thousand years ago and which still carried powerful meanings to them. Even the counting of years and centuries proved difficult in a world where time and space remain relevant as they relate to an empirical sense of proximity.

My own enthusiasm must be tamed now, otherwise I will get carried away and be tempted to recall all the discussions around Descartes' cogito and his belief in the unique adequacy of each individual's reason for the discovery of truth. Or the controversy raised within my uncommon assembly by Kant's *sapere aude*, that is, "it is our responsibility to use our own reason." So many people, out of idleness and cowardice, willingly surrender their capacity to think for themselves in spite of the fact that nature has enfranchised them to do so.

I do not want at this point to mislead you into thinking that I am a philosophy teacher who planned to experiment, or that the peasants had grasped the conceptual framework the underlies each philosophical system. My endeavor was inspired by an unfathomable desire to build bridges among sectors of Haitian society that have been kept apart for ages. It then occurred to me that philosophy, inasmuch as it is also an analysis of experience, constituted the best approach to do so. By the same token, I meant to prove wrong the too often used Haitian popular mockery that equates philosophy with an esoteric and useless babble. I somehow succeeded in communicating to the peasants my passion for a subject that has enlightened the history of the human mind, while allowing for their own level of understanding. I shall always remember this ageless peasant who told me at the end of a session, "Literacy would have changed our minds and our ways of thinking and of looking at things."

Literacy and the origins of writing

Let me now share with you a different experience. Just after Duvalier's departure in 1986, the Catholic Church launched a daring nationwide literacy program called Mission Alfa that aimed at teaching basic reading and writing skills to three million adult Haitians, mostly peasants, who never had the opportunity to get to school. I was hired as a member of the national training team whose mission was to train and assist thousands of facilitators mobilized throughout the country. My personal motivations were practically the same as those mentioned earlier in the case of the philosophy course. At the time, the effervescence caused by the recovery of personal freedom and civil liberties added a sense of urgency and, paradoxically, of unlimited possibilities.

For my own benefit, I decided to go back to my classics in order to refresh my memory about the invention of the written word and the alphabet, and also about the role this astonishing device has played in the emergence of democracy in Athens some 700 years before Christ. This proved extremely rewarding. In the course of my eighteen months in the program, each time I asked the following question to participants, in the cities, the village centers, or the most remoter areas, "Why do you want to learn how to read and write?" I got the same answers, "because I want to read by myself the Bible, the Constitution, and the laws of my country, I want to know my rights." And also, "because I want to be able to take care of my own business by myself."

The analogy stood for itself. Does not Jack Goody teach us in his two major books, *The Logic of Writing* and *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, how the writing systems created five thousand years ago by the Sumerians, the Phoenicians, and the Egyptians have played a determining role in the codification and regulation of religion, political systems, economy, and law? From pictographic, ideographic, and cuneiform aide-memoire, they have gradually developed into complex modes of communication, as important, if not more important at times, than what

Marx has called the modes of production. That Haitian peasants, in their quest for social change, could refer to the same categories revealed a profound and archetypal sense of the paradigmatic and universal values democratic societies stand for. Whether they viewed such a society as pure utopia or spent hours reflecting on the negative effects of their own destitution, they sensed the time of exclusion had come to an end. From now on, they had to be counted in. That is why they were so eagerly breaking away from a past which had always silenced them. Today, they were voicing their points of view openly in public debates. That is also why elections were confusedly acknowledged as both an act to mark the end of the presidency-for-life, and at the same time, a definitive public recognition of their equal political rights.

And yet, such clairvoyance could not outweigh the unwieldiness of the past. As Mats Lundahl puts it in his outstanding research on our rural economy, *Peasants and Poverty: a Study of Haiti*, "...a full comprehension of today's problems requires thorough acquaintance with events that took place during the nineteenth century and in certain instances during the colonial period."

Contradiction rooted in history

I will not recount here the history of the Atlantic slave trade, or our struggle against Napoleon's troops which culminated in Haiti's independence as early as 1804. Several highly praised scholars have treated the subject at length; however, I want to underscore some facts of high importance. Contemporary historians such as Carolyn Fick, Louis Sala-Molins, Jean Fouchard, and Michel Rolf Trouillot, to name a few, have all pointed out that, at the time of the French Revolution in 1789, and on the eve of the slave outbreak in 1791, Saint-Domingue counted about 525,000 inhabitants. The slaves alone numbered over 465,000. Two-thirds of the slave population were African born. That is to say they had just experienced what Edouard Glissant has labeled "the original trauma" of deportation and they had known the harshness of the Black Code for

a relatively short period. Some of them had probably escaped and lived as maroons. After a bloody war against the colonial powers, they all had become freed men, wandering in an unknown land, speaking a fragmented language, worshipping old gods, and creating a new peasant culture in utterly adverse conditions. They were the forefathers of the peasant groups I happened to work with since the 1980s.

One significant feature of the post-independence era has been highlighted by what Michel Rolf Trouillot described as "state against nation." Indeed, the project of the new state and that of the new nation proved irreconcilable. They parted to move in opposite directions. On the one hand, a class of Creole *affranchis*, mulatto and black, heroes of the war, disputed leadership and power while mimicking the European models. On the other hand, masses of former *bossale* slaves spread in small groups in the countryside, forging their own vision of life, illness, and death. This laid the foundations of our social and cultural dichotomy.

In the meantime, many international forces were operating to keep Haiti poor and backward throughout the nineteenth century. Ostracized by the western world, the new republic had to pay a high price for recognition. In 1825, Charles X demanded that an indemnity of twenty-five million gold francs be paid if France were to accept Haiti's independence. The Black Republic's last installment was made in the 1920s. The United States waited for the abolition of slavery in their southern states, some sixty years after our victory over the French colonial system, to send their first ambassador to Haiti. According to Mintz, until the twentieth century, "financing of the many revolutions was usually provided by foreign merchants, bent upon installing a government that would grant them special concessions." And Monroe's doctrine struck home. In July 1915, after a decade of political unrest, the United States Marines set foot in Haiti and they were not to leave until 1934. The occupation of Haiti gave little in return for its denial of the claim of national sovereignty. Since that time, Haitian history has demonstrated that United

States aid has produced no enduring improvement of any kind.

In 1974, Sidney Mintz described Haiti's rural economy as a "quasi-capitalistic society." What he meant was that "small-scale peasants of the Haitian sort do not seek to change or expand their production, so much as to conserve a way of life set by tradition. This ideology of resistance to social and cultural change is a major obstacle to development; yet it would be rash to damn it without reflection." In other words, having learned by experience that his surplus-producing capacity does not guarantee the kind and quality of public services the state was supposed to provide, the peasant refuses to produce more and improved cash crops. Moreover, he has no say in setting their price, and yet he lives in a free market economy. Leading Mintz to conclude, "Under the circumstances, it is naïve to suppose that education alone can make the peasant's role in economic and political development a more active one...unless the promises of greater economic rewards or of improved social services for the rural masses are occasionally honored." Today such French authors like Gerard Barthelemy have gone as far as to ascertain that since 1804, Haiti has chosen to create a new type of society which is the negation of the so-called universal western democratic values. What has been defined as under-development, supposedly characterized by eurocentric derogatory expressions such as incapacity, ignorance, and backwardness, is only a different way masses of former bossales slaves have chosen to invent a radically new culture. The value system must change if the peasants are to engage in what is called development (*Le pays en dehors, 1989 and Dans la splendeur d'un apres-midi d'histoire, 1996*).

The signs of change

Although there are nuances between Mintz and Barthelemy, and I do not necessarily agree with their conclusions, they both warn us of major obstacles that lie on the way to development and democracy in Haiti. My purpose is not to invalidate the acute observations of both authors;

rather, I contend once again that there are profound mutations shaking the foundations of Haitian society today. In a sense, they have concurred to create the conditions of our fragile democratic transition, a transition characterized by an extreme tension between the weight of the past and a strong pulsion toward the redefinition of our social contract. Stories like the ones I related to you at the beginning of this conference are signs and signals of changing times.

And when did these changes start to occur? What factors have gradually combined to destabilize the structure and the functioning mode of a society which, though utterly unjust and unequal, has been capable of maintaining an in-depth equilibrium for more than a century? Haiti's history is known for its political turbulence and its *revolutions de palais*; however, has excessive governmental instability challenged the social, cultural, and economic configurations, outlined since 1804? Why, and under the pressure of what obscure forces, has a peasantry who has been "largely irrelevant to national political decisions" erupted suddenly on the political scene, in the 1980s, and demanded to be considered an active player? Answers to these questions cannot be anything but complex. I shall try to set forth a few propositions in an attempt to give credit to my main argument.

Determining factors for the emergence of a will to change

First of all, let us examine a major contradiction that emerged from Duvalier's regime. In his early days, the dictator had expelled the French Archbishop of Port-au-Prince who had dared to protest illegal arrests that had just been perpetrated against some teachers. In his conflict with the powerful Catholic Church, he then expelled the Jesuit order. In his mind, the only way to replace those who had been forced to leave was to create an indigenous clergy, dedicated to his person. In some way, he did succeed because a few priests got involved in the government, worked in his cabinet as counselors, and were even designated by the public as *touton-macoute*. However, for reasons that are yet to

be better analyzed, the new generation of Haitian priests who came from different social horizons did not become devoted to the dictator. On the contrary, a sizeable group espoused Council Vatican II's prescriptions which, in many ways, prefigured the liberation theology movement.

The shortcomings of such a sketchy description should not overshadow the important role this particular movement has played since the 1980s. In a country where all free unions were banned, the Church became the only place where people, mostly poor, could get together, pray together, sing together, and give together new meanings to the Gospel. As a growing unifying force, they gradually became convinced that they could challenge the authoritarian order. Religion became a political vector for addressing issues such as injustice, illiteracy, and poverty. As a matter of fact, it is from this deep-rooted experience that Aristotele was to emerge later on as a powerful symbolic figure, both religious and political.

The Haitian diaspora was also to play a role in sending home words about freedom and hope. In two decades, more than one and a half million Haitians had left the country for political or economic reasons. Coming from all social classes, they kept close ties to the mother country. While most of them were working quite hard to make a living in unfamiliar cities like New York, Miami, Boston, Mexico City, Montreal, Paris, and in the Dominican Republic, they could not help but to compare the positive aspects of their new lives against the dreadful conditions that still prevailed at home. They constituted strong opposition movements that worked at establishing links with local opponents to the regime. Also, the boat people movement had created a tightening of borders in all countries against the so-called illegal immigrants. Escaping proved more and more difficult. Resistance had to be better organized from inside.

A third factor worth considering is the impact created by certain radio stations in the same period. Taking Baby Doc's word about a so-called liberalization process that was to attract foreign investment and foster

economic development, independent media set forth to create a short-lived but unprecedented free press movement in the country. Indeed, creole was to be heard for the first time over the radio. News, educational programs, and protest songs entered every home even in the most otherwise inaccessible villages. The diaspora was faced with a constant and popular demand for transistor radios and batteries.

Thanks to those gadgets, Haitians who stayed home lived such events as the end of Somoza in Nicaragua, that of Stroessner in Paraguay and that of the Shah of Iran as vicarious experiences. They started to believe that Duvalier's days were also numbered.

The sense of isolation the people had suffered hitherto was gradually breaking off. In turn, the openness had liberated a strong desire for learning, and a drive for freedom and justice that was to be magnified manifold after Duvalier's departure in February, 1986. Of course, several other factors, both internal and international, should be taken into account when analyzing the fall of the dictatorship. However, what seems phenomenal is that masses of poor and illiterate people realized in so many ways that education, freedom of speech, and justice were at the core of any democratic process. It is so unfortunate that with regard to these complex issues, even the recently democratically-elected governments have shown so little imagination and such a lack of vision.

The issue of education in Haiti

Historically, very little attention has been devoted to education in Haiti. After independence, most of the resources of the ravaged country had been mobilized toward defense. Until Aristide, close to 50 percent of the national budget was allocated to the army, and only five percent went to education. In 1860, the Haitian State had signed with the Vatican a treaty by which, among other clerical matters, the government surrendered to the Catholic Church its prerogative to provide quality education to the people. The Church opened new private schools dedicated to creating an elite group much better versed in French history

and literature than in mastering its own complex environment. Even Haiti's history was taught by French priests and brothers. In 1946, when, in a time of nationalistic fever, a concerned Minister of Education passed a decree inviting Haitian history teachers to take over, the Church threatened to close the schools and leave the country. Why such an event did not create an uproar of protest among the Haitian intelligentsia of the time is still a mystery to many of us.

Until today, out of 100 children of school age, ten go to public schools, thirty-two go to private schools, and fifty-eight don't go to school at all. The popular demand for education, coming primarily from the newly-enfranchised but still illiterate majority, has not been met by the public sector. The vacuum has been filled by profit-oriented private schools putting up a caricature of education without books or libraries, without maps, often without blackboard, chalk, or paper, with poorly-trained teachers, if trained at all. Private houses are being transformed into private schools in every street of every city in the country. No standards are respected on any account. Haiti is the country of thousands of schools without education. Most parents, very often illiterate themselves, have no choice but to make immense sacrifices in order to send their children to those schools. They hope that education will pave the way to a better life for their offspring. Yet, the results are catastrophic. After twelve years of schooling, a youth still has to learn just about everything. His ignorance shows in every field of knowledge, and above all, he has not mastered any language.

The language issue deserves special attention. The Constitution of 1987 has acknowledged for the first time both French and Creole as the two official languages of the country. Previously only French was recognized as the official language. Yet, 90 percent of the population speaks only Creole, whereas just about ten percent are indeed bilingual. As a matter of fact, all Haitians speak Creole, an idiom created during colonial times for communication purposes between the masters and the slaves, and

among the slaves themselves. Although it has been stated that Creole's structure is of African origin, its vocabulary has borrowed 95 percent of its words from French. Creole has always been used as an oral language, and the first systematic attempt to put it in writing came from a British Methodist minister who, in the early 1940s, endeavored to translate the Bible into Creole, using Laubach's phonetic system. His intent was to teach reading skills to the poor so they could read the Bible without meditation. Haitian intellectuals at the time felt very offended by the minister's project, and they argued that the phonetic system would cut Creole off from its French roots. Yet, they proposed no alternative to the literacy program. After four decades of vain debates as to how Creole should be written, Duvalier's government passed a decree adopting the phonetical form as the official codification of the tongue. To date this continues to raise controversy. At the same time no serious attempt to bring literacy to the people, either the children or the adults, has really been sustainable.

In the case of Haiti, we cannot speak of a disaffection toward French. It has never been taught but to a very small percentage of the population who could afford to go to school. In fact no government in two centuries has really shown any political will to tackle the problem of illiteracy. As said earlier, the part of the national budget allocated to education is very insignificant. And yet, as noted by Jean Metelus, a Haitian neurologist and linguist who wrote a very interesting article on the subject, it is under Duvalier's regime - the most retrograde, the most repressive, and the most corrupt government - that French had been targeted as the main cause of illiteracy. During that time the Ministry of National Education decided to introduce Creole in schools as the chosen language for the learning process and French would be introduced after the fourth year as a second language but only to teach conversation techniques. Then only in the fifth year would French be introduced in the written form. The education reform turned out to be a big fiasco. No books or other written materials existed in Creole and no efforts were

made to fill in the gaps. Teachers received no training in Creole or in French, and they were left lost and unprepared to face their students. Generations of children were used as guinea pigs and today they cannot read or write in any language, let alone speak and argue in an articulate and clear manner. As a result, freedom of speech, which is a natural consequence of the post-dictatorial period, seems deplorably mediocre, fragmented, unstructured, univocal, and non-argumentative. And this is apparent everywhere, in Parliament, in schools, in public debates, and, most of all, over the radio.

Yet not everyone falls for the political demagoguery that in a way still prevails toward the language issue. Scholars like Father Claude Souffrant, a Haitian Jesuit, have repeatedly demonstrated how the promotion of Creole in fact reinforces the inequalities of our society. To keep the poor and destitute from learning French at an early age perpetuates their exclusion and isolation. By the same token, this reinforces the social position of the small, dominant elite who continue to be the only sector of the population to have access to the world of knowledge and of economic advantages linked to the use of an international language. Jean Metellus also stresses that at the end of the twentieth century, a large part of the basic language skills of any human being in the world is made of medical, legal, and scientific words. If Haitians are not to be left out of this human adventure, they need to make proper use of an international language, and in our case, for historical reasons this language has to be French.

Clearly, a choice has to be made. At this point Creole cannot be the only learning vehicle for the people. Haiti today has to be bilingual if not multilingual: Creole and French for historical reasons, English and Spanish because of Haiti's geographic position in the Caribbean. At any rate, if literacy programs for adults should continue to be taught in Creole, early childhood education and all subsequent years of schooling should be done in French, at best in French and Creole. Such a deci-

sion should be assumed courageously, and its consequences analyzed carefully. The problem of education is not just a matter of language. It encompasses a whole new approach to teaching and learning, coherent with our vision of a democratic and open society in a changing world.

I have witnessed the passion for learning in French and sometimes English as I implement with my colleagues at the Foundation a library program that focuses on making books available to youth groups in impoverished neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince and in poor rural areas. Simple reading methods have increased Haitians' capacity to read and developed their appetite for scientific answers. This is extremely important in a society where natural phenomena are still viewed as manifestations from gods and spirits.

Indeed, in the long run, initiatives like the library program may have an impact on not only education and culture but also in the realm of justice. As I mentioned earlier, over the past ten years popular demands have shown a consistently sharp intuition that justice is at the heart of democracy. However, when notions of good and evil still belong to the sacred sphere, when transgressions of the law are not sanctioned because they are a warning from Providence, when crime is not perceived as man's responsibility but as a revenge from the gods, we still have a long way to go to establish the legal process of justice. The profound mutation that should occur on that account presupposes once again large-scale education programs that aim primarily at the development of critical thinking and the mastery of language on scientific grounds. I am well aware of what the designing of such education programs implies. And I also know there will be no miracles. We will have to work very hard to achieve the level of results our people deserve. However, as shown in the stories I have related to you earlier, the most desperate situation begets creative ways out. Haitian art is another powerful illustration of what can emerge from chaos. As you all know, Haitian history begins with a succession of genocides for which there is little or no oral or writ-



ten legacy. Such collective amnesia has been carried over into the history of the new republic in which the former slaves were denied access to the written word, thereby preventing the appropriation of a collective memory. Refuge and escape have been found in the enchanted world of the imaginary and in the spectacular explosion of its artistic expression. That the graphic intelligence of poor illiterate people has been used in such creative ways remains a mystery to most observers. Alien to the written word, painters and sculptors have invented an incredible realm of forms and colors. The most vibrant tribute to that extraordinary creativity came from Andre Malraux who, in his famous work *L'intemporel*, has confessed his admiration as well as his perplexity before what he called "the enigma of Haitian art."

Just like its painters who have found creative ways to escape from the narrowness and the closeness of their environment, Haiti has to overcome the scars of the past and make a breakthrough toward building a democratic society. As I have tried to convey to you, in the midst of our poverty there are fertile fields of opportunity. I only hope that Haiti's friends all over the world will continue to show support and solidarity to those of us who still struggle with Haiti's multiple enigmas: listening to the whispers from below; feeling for new forms; aspiring to new values; reading the minds of democracy.

Michèle D. Pierre-Louis
November 1997

h ä - l'è - t è