

Haiti, Occupied Country

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Consult any encyclopedia. Ask which was the first free country in America. You will get the same answer: the United States.

But the United States declared its independence when it was a nation with 650,000 slaves who remained so for another century, and its first Constitution said that a black slave was equal to three fifths of a person.

And if you ask any encyclopedia which was the first country to abolish slavery, you will always get the same answer: England.

But the first country that abolished slavery was not England, but Haiti, which is still expiating the sin of its dignity.

The black slaves of Haiti defeated Napoleon Bonaparte's glorious army, and Europe never forgave the humiliation. For over a century and half, Haiti paid France a huge compensation for being guilty of its freedom, but not even that was enough.

This black insolence still hurts the world's white masters. Of all that, we know very little or nothing.

Haiti is an invisible country. It only attained fame after the earthquake of January 2010 that killed more than 200,000 Haitians. The tragedy put the country fleetingly in the media spotlight.

Haiti is not known by the talent of its artists: scrap magicians capable of transforming garbage into beauty. Nor is it known for its historical feats in the war against slavery and colonial oppression.

It is worth repeating it once again, so that the deaf can hear: Haiti was the founding country of the independence of America and the first one that defeated slavery in the world. It deserves much more than the fame sprung from its misfortunes.

At present, the armies from several countries, including mine, are occupying Haiti. How is this military invasion justified? By alleging that Haiti endangers international security. Nothing more.

Throughout the 19th century, Haiti's example was a threat to the security of countries that still continued practicing slavery. Thomas Jefferson said: "From Haiti came the pest of rebellion."

In South Carolina, for example, the law allowed imprisonment of any black sailor while his ship was at dock, because of the risk that he could contaminate with the anti-slavery pest. And in Brazil, this pest was called "Haitianism."

In the 20th century, Haiti was invaded by the U.S. Marines for being an insecure country for its foreign creditors. The invaders began by taking possession of the customs offices and giving the Haitian National Bank to the City Bank of New York. Since they were already there, they decided to stay for 19 years.

The crossing of the border from the Dominican Republic to Haiti is named: "The wrong step."

Maybe the name is a call to arms: Are you entering the black world, black magic, witchcraft... Vodou, the religion that slaves brought from Africa, was nationalized in Haiti; it has no right to be called a religion. From the point of view of proprietors of civilization, Vodou is a black thing, ignorance, backwardness, pure superstition. The Catholic Church, with plenty of followers capable of selling the saints' fingernails and the Archangel Gabriel's feathers, enabled this superstition to be officially forbidden in 1845, 1860, 1896, 1915, and 1942, without the people paying any mind.

But for a few years now, evangelical sects have been in charge of the war against superstition in Haiti. Those sects come from the United States, a country that does not have a 13th floor in its buildings, nor row 13 in its airplanes, and that is inhabited by civilized Christians who believe God made the world in one week.

In that country, the evangelical preacher Pat Robertson explained on television the earthquake of the year 2010. This shepherd of souls revealed that the Haitian blacks had won their independence from France with a Vodou ceremony that invoked the Devil's help from the depths of the Haitian jungle. The Devil, who gave them their freedom, sent the earthquake to collect.

How long will foreign soldiers remain in Haiti? They arrived to stabilize and help, but for seven years, they've been eating their breakfast and destabilizing this country which does not want them.

The military occupation of Haiti is costing the United Nations more than \$800 million a year.

If the UN dedicated these funds to technical cooperation and social solidarity, Haitians could get a good boost to develop their creative energies. Then they would be saved from their armed saviors who have a certain tendency to violate, kill, and give fatal illnesses.

Haiti does not need anyone to come and multiply its misfortunes. Neither does it need anyone's charity. Or as an ancient African proverb goes: "The hand that gives is always above the hand that receives."

But Haiti does need solidarity, doctors, schools, hospitals, and a true collaboration that makes possible the rebirth of its food sovereignty, killed by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other philanthropic societies.

For us, Latin Americans, that solidarity is a debt of gratitude: it will be the best way to say thanks to this little great nation that in 1804 opened for us, with its contagious example, the

doors of freedom.

(This article is dedicated to Guillermo Chifflet who was forced to resign from Uruguay's Chamber of Deputies when he voted against sending soldiers to Haiti.)

Eduardo Galeano is a Uruguayan journalist, writer and novelist, whose best known works are "Memoria del Fuego" (Memory of Fire Trilogy, 1986) and "Las venas abiertas de America Latina" (Open Veins of Latin America, 1971). He gave this speech on Sep. 27, 2011 at the National Library in Montevideo in a panel debate entitled Haiti and Latin America.

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