

## **HAITI BETWEEN WRECKAGE AND HOPE: SOCIAL LANDSCAPE AND OUTLOOK**

(Wiener Kerns Fleurimond, *Haiti, l'état de la Nation*, Matoury, Guyane française,  
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**Speranța Sofia MILANCOVICI**

Vasile Goldiș Western University of Arad

Faculty of Social and Humanistic Sciences, Arad, Romania

Tel: 0040 – 257 – 250599 E-mail: m\_speranta@yahoo.com

The Ibis Rouge publishing house, which claims to be specialized in literature connected to the Caribbean space, the Indian Ocean and the Amazon, published in 2015 a work that thoroughly and successfully fills in the blank spaces in the socio-political, economic, administrative and cultural space of Haiti, a fascinating country of a wild beauty and with an amazing losing vocation. A volume dedicated to the contemporary history of a state where millions of inhabitants live through their humiliating poverty, assuming a destiny which lies at the fingertips of a financial and decisional elite, governed by individualism and which puts Haiti on a labyrinthic path, with no light or way out.

The author, Wiener Kerns Fleurimond, a columnist and journalist in France, has decided, after more than 30 years in Paris, to return to his homeland and to make available the expertise he acquired in the French institutions and in the European cultural space.

The 404 pages represent a narrated trip into the country and life of a people proud of their origins, a depository of an authentic culture, but which seems to have accommodated with the generalized laxity and with the absurdity of an existence where the unacceptable has become natural.

The book is divided into three massive parts, all of which are well-organized in terms of structure and information, each with its corresponding subchapters. The research opens with a brief, panoramic view of history and the Haitian administration and with a presentation signed by Antoine Fritz Pierre of the Haitian Institute of Geography and History.

As the author himself notes, in the introduction to his work, it is the result of three sabbaticals dedicated to traveling through Haiti, to archive work and the analysis of the administrative and public services institutions' activity, in order to thoroughly understand the meaning of Louis-Joseph Janvier's words, a Haitian diplomat and politician who suggestively described Haiti as a small and singular country which even the dogs would abandon, provided they could do so. (p. 18)

The first part, which is entitled *Institutions, administrations, socio-political actors*, brings into discussion the Haitian parliament, government, the presidency and its difficult relationship with the Prime Minister's Office.

The Haitian political parties are also analyzed here, along with the weakened judiciary system, the municipalities and the municipality's "misery", the

HNP (Haitian National Police), a lifeless institution, dependent on the international community and – directly linked to the latter – the MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti) – discussed in terms of occupying the Haitian territory.

The author's position is, undoubtedly, against the UN's presence in Haiti, MINUSTAH being "for the benefit of anyone, but Haiti" (p. 55). Fleurimond denounces the abuses committed by some of the mission's personnel, which is perceived as an international occupation force: rapes, robberies, cases of torturing the local people, diseases – see cholera, introduced in the country by the soldiers of the MINUSTAH's Nepalese contingent.

Brutality against citizens, the distrust regarding the HNP, "whom they avoid as they do the plague" (p. 56), has attracted the UN mission's lack of popularity, a mission which, as apparent from the author's expose, is mostly formed of soldiers, police or Third World civilian personnel.

The text flows without restraint, presenting and penalizing the complicity of the local and central Haitian authorities, which are witnesses or even accomplices in creating this state of generalized chaos, authorities which have become the underlings of foreign courts, which became state within state. The bottom line is that, if in 2004, the MINUSTAH presence was somewhat useful, it currently does nothing but reinforce the negative image of a tributary country, in which the social and political stability is precarious.

Naturally, the author's position is offset by that of other sociologists, strategists, diplomats or international relations specialists, who argue for the MINUSTAH's role from different perspectives, from the protection of the economic class and the investors, to being a promoter of good practices in security to the support of the HNP, absolutely necessary for the consolidation of the public order and stability.

Fleurimond's critical eye also focuses on the interference of the NGOs in the local scenery; the author investigates the interests that govern these so-called charities, which have transformed the country into a veritable "Republic of NGOs". (p. 99)

The overview on the institutions and organizations does not end before briefly presenting the situation of the People's Organizations (PO), which are some type of unions whose influence is dangerously high, especially since the quasi-generalized mess the country is in, has not avoided this sector. On the other hand, the Organized Civil Society, i.e. the national religious, social, entrepreneurial, cultural or humanitarian organizations are attacking political positions, and the weakness of the parties before this onslaught is likely to further intensify the impression of a "labyrinth of irreversible underdevelopment" due to state institutions' lack of solidarity. (p. 124)

Last but not least, the army's situation is brought forth; it was dissolved without notice by president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 1994, and "revived" by Michael Joseph Martelly, whose program in this sense has considerable shortcomings regarding its financing, schooling and organization, in a country

where the police force is far from being capable of ensuring order and safeguarding the national integrity. On the one hand, Haiti is a country threatened from within, by its own entities hostile to the social and political stability; on the other hand, an army should be able to face the natural challenges the country is subjected to, through its geographical position, as well as face the Dominican army, in case of conflict between the two states, taking into consideration “the multiple provocations of the Dominican soldiers along the border ... Or the Dominican soldiers’ escapades on Haitian territory, as if they were on conquered land.” (p. 135).

The second part is concerned with social issues and services. The situation of inhabitable places and the public policies regarding the Haitian real estate holds an important place in the volume. The catastrophic reality does not date only from January the 12<sup>th</sup> 2010, since the only thing that earthquake did was wipe off the face of the earth an already very poor infrastructure. The discussion returns, yet again, to the presence, in the country, of the MINUSTAH, which has completely overturned the value of the real estate and hotels sector. Naturally and predictably, the lucky owners of buildings close to American or European standards rent out at astronomical prices for the average Haitian family.

Regarding the vital issue of the drinkable water network, here, the tragic nature of the situation escalates to the extremes. The tap water is not drinkable in Haiti, but with enormous risks which impede one’s health and life. As Fleurimond notes, with a hint of tragic humor, this is one of the records that can put the country in the Guinness World Records book: the only country in the world that lacks drinking water for its citizens, while the island is full of springs and the groundwater is accessible throughout the entire country. The bottled and treated water industry is supported by an inhumane policy, both by big corporations and international organizations, as well as by the national Haitian authorities. (p. 157)

Electricity is, predictably, another weak point of the country and, equally, another lucrative source of income for those whose interests converge towards maintaining the status quo (shop owners selling generators or even representatives of the Electricité d’Haïti Company suspected of complicity in encouraging policies contrary to the efficient management of the situation).

As for the health system and the state of the hospitals, the situation is so dangerous, degraded and inconsistent with any provision of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so much so that an urgent intervention has already been enormously delayed. Despite the fact that there are general hospitals throughout the country, the sanitation is poor and endangers not only the patients, but the medical teams and the practicing students as well. As for the morgue serving the capital, it is based in a building which has been irreversibly damaged by the 2010 earthquake, with no electricity (and, consequently, no cooling system!), invaded by rats and stray animals that eat decaying corpses. Its gates are open day and night and the putrid smell and insects invade the neighborhood. We should note the author’s appreciation for the MINUSTAH representatives, whom he has criticized so many times before, who

acted in this sense to equip the morgue with two refrigerated rooms, somewhat contributing to limiting the imminent danger for the entire neighborhood. (p. 171)

The National Archives, street markets, clandestine trade, the big industrial parks, the baking and insurance system (of these, the only compulsory ones in Haiti are those regarding cars) and the state of the road infrastructure are brought into discussion. As for the public transport and the famous Tap-Tap or moto-taxi, they remain a subject of endless astonishment for any visitor of the country. Moreover, the attempt of using these means of transport is also risky, in all respects. The total anarchy facilitates the disregard for the established routes, the language and attitude of the drivers oftentimes being hostile, even violent and rates could increase according to random criteria. The author describes the situation as “an organized brothel” (p. 22, 237), everyone, natives or foreigners, risking getting lost in a capital of our century and shipwrecking in the notorious “bidonville”, neighborhood-cities of the poor, as well as Cité Soleil, La Saline or Canapé Vert, for example. In this context, the police is also absolutely powerless.

Contrary to the general opinion, Fleurimond notes, Cité Soleil is not the sum of all vices and evils of Haiti. After having conducted field research (p. 184), the author notes that there are schools and learning centers here, but the drugs and unemployment prevent the commune from exiting the vicious circle of corruption, poverty and administrative debacle, which has pushed the entire country to an agonizing coma from which a return is hard to imagine, let alone implement.

After this incursion into what services mean (or rather, the lack thereof) in Haiti, a subchapter dedicated to the protection of the environment in this country only reinforces and complements the generalized status quo. In a country lacking a green/eco-friendly party (p. 243), where the state apparatus does not work towards a coherent waste management policy, of different types, air pollution is visible to the naked eye and not only in the major conurbations. The rivers (for example, the Bois de Chêne river, whose riverbed usually dries up, crosses the capital) have become favorite places for storing various types of trash. Nowadays, Port-au-Prince appears to be a hopeless, huge waste container.

The last part of the volume takes us into the cultural area, without offering more chances for optimism than the previous precedents. An important aspect is the languages spoken in Haiti, where French has been losing ground significantly, under the massive influence of the United States and where the expression in Molière’s language is proof of education rather than an everyday communication instrument. Creole, the language invented by the slaves, has taken root and developed enough to invade the conversations in urban areas, in governmental institutions and universities, especially since a ministerial committee was created, responsible with setting up an Academy of Creole, in order to scientifically and harmoniously develop this linguistic entity. (p. 267)

Regarding education, either high-school or university, its trajectory is downward, despite the obvious concern of the authorities to (re)build schools all across Haiti. The lack of preoccupations in the quality area is felt, and shockwaves are propagated at the university level. An alarming proportion of the teachers have

no pedagogical training. Worse than that, except for a few public universities or a couple of authorized private ones, the vast majority operate without any legal basis and, consequently, cannot issue any valid diploma, which is unsanctioned by the authorities.

The technologically mediated communication is, in turn, subject to financial constraints; consequently, mobile telephony and the internet are a reality in today's Haiti, without being able to talk about a generalized access of the population to these services.

The radio is the most popular among Haitian media consumers, which is explained by the affordable costs, the possible independence of electricity and the passion of the locals for music and casual entertainment broadcasts. Television is still a luxury, in some parts, whilst the written press is underrepresented. In terms of literature and art as a whole, things are different. If Haiti is a country with not a very flattering image regarding political, economic or social stability as a whole, the Haitian literature is recognized worldwide, be it of French or Creole expression.

The religions are the subject of another subchapter of the volume and the religious freedom and equality make Haiti a country of pluralism and tolerance, in this regard. Along with Catholicism, other cults have appeared, such as the Pentecostal, Methodist or that of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Islamists, Moslems and, naturally, Voodoo practitioners, which was officially recognized as a religion by the 1987 Constitution.

After a virtual "trip" to Haiti, through the administrative, political, social and ecological nightmare of the country, the natural question is what can attract investors and consumers to the tourism industry, on this land? The answer lies in the inestimable natural potential, in the landscapes of a ravishing beauty, in the spectacular beaches and flora that is the only counterbalance to the urban landfill, the worldwide, unique archeological sites and the colorful culture, both literally and figuratively, with which this country does not cease to amaze and attract more or less altruistic foreign gazes.

Completed with well-chosen pictures that illustrate the essence of the Haitian universe, with an index useful to in-depth reading and with an up to date bibliography, thoroughly and clearly structured, Wiener Kerns Fleurimond's volume is a harsh but honest review of the current Haitian realities and perspectives; it is a denunciation of the absolute anarchy paralyzing the advancement of every sector of the public and private life, penalizing the proverbial neglect, the acceptance of the unacceptable, the stupidity of the ancestral slackness and weakness of this people who has made a way of life out of ignoring its own strengths.

The volume is equally an elaborated and useful guide of the Haitian administrative chaos, as well as a book with a national message; beyond the harshness of some of the core analyses regarding the generalized abandonment, one can identify the hope of a rebirth of the sense of pride and dignity of being a citizen. It is a real voyage for the author and an imaginary one for the reader, in a

country of opposites, where to choose to live, when there is an alternative, is an act of acknowledgement as well as an act of faith.