

Democracy and diversity: lessons from Haïti

*Jean-Bertrand Aristide*¹

Honorary Researcher, University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa

In Haiti, where the first and only successful slave revolution occurred two centuries ago, democracy suffers from split-brain syndrome. Since our independence in 1804 the public and private sectors have displayed patterns of abnormal communication resembling those of both hemispheres of people with split brain. Democratic principles, critical education at all levels, social decussation, social interaction among all Haitians, rich and poor without exclusion, political stability and political partnership between public and private sectors are what Haiti desperately needs. Democracy requires an educational shift to face the challenges of an emerging global society and to build a new century where finally, we hope, the voices of the Haitian people will be heard. Heard by the countries that became rich because of Haitian blood; heard by millions of people who owe an unforgettable debt of freedom to descendants from Africa.

In an attempt to define the concept of power, Joseph S Nye Jr claims: "Power, like love, is easier to experience than to define ... Power in international politics is like the weather. Everyone talks about it, but few understand it. Just as farmers and meteorologists try to forecast storms, so do leaders and analysts try to understand the dynamics of major changes in the distribution of power among nations" (Nye 2004: 53). At a national level, is it easier to define democracy than it is to define power? What does democracy mean for Haiti where the first and only successful slave revolution occurred two centuries ago?

To understand democracy in Haiti, one of the best metaphors one can use is the split brain. Neuroscientists refer to the split-brain syndrome when the corpus callosum connecting the two hemispheres of the brain is severed. In addition to the anterior commissure² that assures some limited interhemispheric communication, the corpus cal-

¹ Guest Researcher, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

² The anterior commissure interconnects the anterior parts of the temporal lobes, as well as the olfactory tracts. Cf. *Clinical neuroanatomy and neuroscience* (5th edition). M.J. Turlough FitzGerald, Gregory Gruener, Estomih Mtui. Elsevier Saunders, Philadelphia. 2007. P. 16.

lossum is the largest white-matter tract connecting our cerebral hemispheres. It matures gradually over the first five to ten years of life. When that massive neural tract of more than 250 million nerve fibres is severed to prevent epileptic seizures, the area that the brain uses to transfer electrical signals between the right and left hemispheres disappears as well (Banich 2004:116). A split brain person faces an acute problem of interhemispheric communication. In other words, cutting the corpus callosum prevents the exchange of information between the two hemispheres.

Democracy in Haiti suffers from split-brain syndrome. Since our independence in 1804, the majority and the minority of the population have not been able to communicate normally. The public and private sectors have always displayed patterns of abnormal communication resembling those of both hemispheres of people with split brain.

Nine years after Roger Wolcott Sperry won the 1981 Nobel Prize for Medicine for his work in split brain research (Finger 2000:281), hope emerged in Haiti for the establishment of normal chains of communication between the public and private sectors. It was the end of 1990. In that same year Madiba had begun to enjoy freedom after spending 27 years in jail. Haitians too shared a powerful experience of freedom: we held our first fair, free and democratic elections in December 1990 – 190 years after our independence. This democratic process that paved the way for better communication lasted only seven months. A brutal coup d'etat prevented the Haitian people from consolidating their democratic experience. I was forced to lead a government in exile. Recognised by the Organization of American States and the United Nations, the government echoed the voices of the Haitian people whose rights were denied by a tiny minority who financed the coup with the powerful support of their foreign allies.

At the time I was based in Washington, DC. One day a former foreign affairs minister of Argentina, who had become president Clinton's special envoy to Haiti, reported a shocking and dramatic statement to me. As he presented me with a report on his most recent trip to Haiti, he started: "Mr. President, I have come back with almost nothing in my hands, and my morale was nearly destroyed by one of the wealthiest men of Haiti. While I was encouraging him to support the restoration of the democratic process rather than the coup d'etat, this wealthy man became furious and said to me: 'Listen, I have hundreds of employees, how could I accept that my vote is equal to their vote? Do you think that is fair? No, I will never accept something like that.'" Very surprised and disturbed by these words, the special

envoy asked the wealthy man: “Do you mean you would prefer an apartheid system?” “Of course,” replied the wealthy man. “I will never accept that my vote is equal to their vote.”

In essence, this shocking and dramatic statement epitomises the very opposite of democracy.

The wealthy man’s response could easily be compared to the answer provided by a female split brain patient to whom a photo of an almost naked man was presented. “When asked about the nature of the photo, she laughed and said: ‘I don’t know; maybe it was because of the machine used to project that photo.’ We know that when a split-brain person views a display briefly in the right visual field, thus seeing it with the left hemisphere, the viewer can name the object very easily. But when that same person views a display in the left visual field (right hemisphere) he or she usually can neither name nor describe the image” (Kalat 2003:424).

Both the wealthy man and the female split brain patient appeared quite normal in their daily life. Like any other person, they worked, talked, interacted in society without visible difficulties. However, the substance of their answers indicates in both cases that some clarification is needed to really understand how their brains work, and subsequently the social pathologies as well.

When a brain is neurologically normal, both hemispheres share electrochemical energy or power (Noback et al 2004:450-451). When a society is democratically normal, both sides – the public and private sectors, or minority and majority – share social and political power. Our wealthy man belongs to the tiny minority of Haitian people or the 1% of the population that controls 52% of the wealth. For most of this 1% (not all of them), if one dares pay taxes, one commits a crime. According to their economic strategy, the fewer taxes you pay, the more wealth you accumulate. So power sharing through a democratic process would end their privileges. Living in a social environment where there are only 1.5 Haitian doctors for every 11.000 Haitians does not pose any real concern for their own health. Keeping the illiteracy rate as high as possible has always been a choice in order to maintain the structures of exploitation. We still have around a 60% illiteracy rate.

Although a democratic system would facilitate investment in health care and education and create wealth in the interest of every single citizen, the 1% categorically opposes such a vision. The voices of this majority are echoed by the wealthy man claiming: “I have hundreds of employees, how could I accept that my vote is equal to their votes? I will never accept something like that.” In other words,

rather than social cohesion, we have social pathologies that resemble the functioning of a split brain.

As we said earlier, when a brain is neurologically normal, both hemispheres share electrochemical energy or power. Motor controls, for instance, are crossed as observed in most brain functions. "The right motor cortex controls the left side of the body, and the left motor cortex controls the right side. The axons of the neurons in each of these cortexes must therefore bifurcate somewhere during their descent to the spinal cord so that they can change sides. This crossover, or decussation, occurs just before the junction between the medulla oblongata and the spinal cord. To be more explicit, we are talking about the crossing of two major fibre systems, the decussation of the cortico-spinal tract and the bulbothalamic tract" (Glees 2005:122). This decussation indicates why strokes on one side of the head typically cause paralysis on the opposite side of the body. So a problem on one side necessarily affects the other side.

The same is true in Haiti; problems in one sector are affecting the other sector. As an example, on one side the tiny minority supported an army of 7 000 soldiers that controlled 40% of the national budget, allowing them and their foreign allies to lead a coup d'etat whenever they decided. The 34th coup d'etat happened just when Haiti celebrated the first and only successful slave revolution that abolished slavery and established universal human rights guaranteeing freedom for any enslaved person who set foot on Haitian soil. The pathological behaviour observed on one side clearly causes economic paralysis on the other side. Without an environment characterised by political stability a country cannot promote economic growth. That political stability is vitally linked to democratic principles and social decussation.

After her corpus callosotomy, the surgical procedure that disconnected her cerebral hemispheres, the female split brain patient could not see the information crossing from the right to the left hemisphere. In fact, the photograph that made her laugh was purposely presented to her right hemisphere through the left eye. Due to the crossing in the optic chiasm, each half of the visual field projects to the opposite side of the brain. She could not identify the photo because the visual information travelled from the left eye to the right hemisphere. If she were asked to use the left hand to take the picture and hold it, she would not have any problems. Why? Because the hemisphere that sees the picture is the right one, so sensory information from the left hand would cross over to the right hemisphere. But we should not expect her to describe the photo even if she holds it,

because the right hemisphere cannot talk; it has little capacity for language.

Analysing the conflict that opposes both hemispheres, Michael Gazzaniga developed the theory of the interpreter, allowing the hemispheres in conflict, particularly the left one, to elaborate on different issues and provide language-based explanations for behaviour. In his compelling book entitled *The social brain*, Gazzaniga identifies such an interpreter with a brain component found in the left dominant hemisphere of right-handed humans. The dynamics that exists between our mind module and our left brain interpreter module is responsible for the generation of human beliefs (Gazzaniga 1985:5).

Such an interpreter can even perform in both normal and split brains. Thus the necessity of elucidating the *concept* of consciousness: what does it mean for a mental state to be conscious?

More precisely, we could ask to what extent the wealthy man was conscious of the limits he was creating for the growth of his own interests when he categorically refused a democratic process. Consciousness depends on the intact functioning of the reticular activating system in the brainstem and the cerebral cortex. Altered consciousness arises from disturbance of these elements. Thus the complicated nature of consciousness (Fuller & Mandford 2006:50).

According to the Higher-Order Thought (HOT), models of consciousness developed in the 1990s by Rosenthal, Gennaro and Natsoulas, a given mental state is conscious if, and only if, the subject of that state possesses a thought about himself (Rowlands 2001:101). From that perspective, yes, the wealthy man was conscious. But could he be more aware of the implications of his refusal to welcome the process of power sharing? Most probably he thought that his position was fair enough and that the special envoy should not have had any serious difficulty in sharing his views and understanding him. In this regard Andrew W. Young claims that “[d]iscussions of consciousness, awareness ... often assume that everyone knows what they are talking about, and that they are talking about the same things” (Revonsuo & Kamppinen 1994:173).

If upon reflection one may become self-conscious (Revonsuo & Kamppinen 1994: 33), it takes healthy-minded people to promote both the growth of consciousness at a collective level and the growth of a democratic process at a national level. There is little doubt, according to Max Velmans, that the phenomenology of human consciousness relates closely to the activities in human brains (Velmans 2000:193). As we all know, if the brain sows not corn, it plants thistles. Education,

critical education and education at all levels are vital for the future of our democratic experience.

Through critical education, the wealthy man and most of the Haitian elites can raise the level of their consciousness and free their minds from their former colonial masters. That would stop them from consolidating neo-colonialism while acting as though they were house slaves. This tiny group perfectly fits the status of mental slaves, while on the other hand the majority of the Haitian people are mentally free from both colonial and neo-colonial rulers.

Relating to their high level of collective consciousness, the majority wants a democratic system which allows for true respect for the universal human rights implemented in Haiti, for the first time on the planet, two centuries ago. They know that our forefathers shed their precious blood in the battles of Yorktown and Savannah, Georgia to help the USA free itself from British domination. They are aware of the contribution of Haiti to Simon Bolivar when the Haitian government provided munitions, weapons, ships and men to free six South American countries at the beginning of the 19th century. They also know that France sent ten warships armed with 500 cannon to Haiti, its wealthiest colony, to force us to pay an indemnity of 150 000 000 gold francs or 21 billion US dollars in order to recognise our independence. So despite the blood that was shed to abolish slavery, we were obliged to pay a sum that amounted to France's total national budget or the value of ten years of all Haitian exports. The determination to reclaim a historical partnership (Kettl 1993:21) between public and private sectors as well as between the minority and the majority of the population reflects the dynamics of any normal brain, in which both cerebral hemispheres need each other.

It has been established that each hemisphere of the brain regulates different functions (Iaccino 1993:51). This complementarity is described by Jeffrey M Clarke and Christina M McCann of the University of North Texas as an anatomical-behavioural relationship. As an example, anatomical and functional hemispheric asymmetries were shown to be greater in right-handers than in left-handers and, to some extent, greater in males compared to females (Beeman & Chiarello 1998:27). Happiness and positive interest activate mostly the left hemisphere, whereas fear and anger activate mostly the right (Kalat 2003:426).

These anatomical hemispheric asymmetries and differences do not mean that one hemisphere is superior to the other. Similarly, in a democratic system the wealthiest cannot pretend to be superior to the poorest; rich countries are not superior to impoverished ones. The

organisation of our cortex into functionally specialised hemispheres (Barchas & Mendoza 1984:139) must inspire us to shape a new society. We must build social relationships beyond any kind of racism, social relationships where human freedom is of transcendental importance to all of us. Social interaction among all Haitians, rich and poor without exclusion, political partnership between public and private sectors – this is what Haiti desperately needs.

And to promote such an inclusive society, in addition to political determination and financial resources, we must pursue a multi-disciplinary approach. For Peter Weingart, Sabine Maasen and Segerstrale, using biological categories in social science discourse is as much a political approach as it is a scientific one (Weingart et al., 1997:65). From either a political or a scientific perspective, democracy implies mutually interdependent concepts such as majority and minority, or liberty and equality as demonstrated by Alison Edgley (2000:42) in her book on the social and political thought of Noam Chomsky.

In conclusion, democracy requires an educational shift to face the challenges of an emerging global society (Mustakova-Possardt 2003:141) and to build a new century where finally, we hope, the voices of the Haitian people will be heard. Heard by the countries that became rich because of Haitian blood; heard by millions of people who owe an unforgettable debt of freedom to descendants from Africa. As the course of human evolution is not a straight line from the common ancestor we shared with chimpanzees, dating back five to seven million years ago, to modern times (Brune, Ribbert & Schiefenhover 2003:113), we do believe it's still possible to fulfil that dream.

Itemba alibulali (*Zulu proverb*).
Hope does not kill.

Haba na haba hujaza kibaba (*Swahili proverb*).
Little by little we will get there.

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