

"De Gaulle had his mysteries like we have Corsica"

wrote André Malraux: "There was in de Gaulle a region we knew we could never explain. That's what I see as Corsica". Nothing has changed on this front. The island seems condemned to remain a "region" plunged in obscurity, or so complex that one is discouraged from attempting an explanation. Yet it is precisely this complexity which, islanders or continentals alike, must accept and explore as the writer Gabriel-Xavier Culioli challenged us to do in his 1990 essay *The Corsican Complex*. Note that he says "complex", not "problem", although the second epithet is applied all too readily by Corsicans themselves. They would find it easier to broach contemporary issues and face up to the future if they agreed to reject the myth of Corsicans as victims of history, substituting a concept more truthful and closer to the facts.

Of course, you must cast your mind back to the eighteenth century for a picture of Corsica at peace with itself. That was Corsica's great period. If the comparison with France's own seventeenth-century glories seems presumptuous, it's worth remembering that the eighteenth century was when everything happened. It was then that the Enlightenment, imported from Marseille, Genoa and Pisa, inspired the Corsican nobility. This gave rise to an unparalleled intellectual ferment from which Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed his Constitution. Two exceptional people, Pascal

Paoli and Napoleon Bonaparte, emerged. Today, Paoli is not remembered beyond the island; Bonaparte's triumphs have overshadowed Paoli's legacy as an austere prophet of democracy. The two achievements are, however, linked. Both Paoli and Bonaparte were products of this extraordinary moment in time which saw Corsica take its place in Europe and unite with France.

Pascal Paoli chose France when, encouraged by the young Bonaparte – both were ardent nationalists – he returned to Corsica in 1790, was elected to head the island's Conseil Général and became Commander-in-Chief of the National Guard. He pitched the infant democratic France against the France of the Ancien Régime. Rather than emphasising France's role in the Treaty of Versailles between Genoa and the Bourbons it is more helpful to remember that Corsica's aspirations found their natural outlets in the French Revolution, to which Paoli's island subscribed. Sadly, this Corsican democracy came up against the bad side of the Revolution, the Girondists. Bonaparte, whose genius had an opportunistic streak, flattered Robespierre, being rewarded with the conduct of the siege of Toulon and the tools to build his prodigious destiny. But if France had not been Girondist who knows what Pascal Paoli, among others, might have created? Instead of being buried in Westminster Abbey beside assorted Huguenots exiled by the repeal of the Edict of Nantes, he could well have found his place of rest in the Pantheon.

Misunderstanding reigns supreme. Corsica sees itself a victim of the Treaty of Versailles, forgetting along the way that there were as many Corsicans fighting in the forces of the Ancien Régime as in the island's army at the tawdry battle of Ponte Novo in 1769. Corsica's adhesion to France was made, in my view, not by the annexation but by the common ground between the Corsican Revolution, inspired by the beliefs of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the French Revolution. From its very birth, the French Republic found Corsica at its side. But such were the misunderstandings from the outset that the people both of the island and the mainland are still today paying the price of a split which set Corsicans against the Republic. So long as narrow-minded Republicans – when will Jean-Pierre Chevenement understand that too much Jacobinism kills the cause? – carry the continental French view of Corsica and set themselves against separatists who actually favour separatism, nothing will change. The dialogue of the deaf will continue, and Corsica will remain mired in its problems. In fact a misreading of history allows one body of contemporary French public opinion,

worried by the turmoil on the island, by the particular brand of nationalism which froze Mérimée's blood, to reject Corsica.

Such French opinion would be well advised to consider to what extent Corsica is victim of an insular existence only comprehensible when cast in a world context. Corsicans have, along with others, been subjected to a uniquely Mediterranean decline emanating from Naples, leaving in its wake many educated people but many poor people too, a sort of noble misery. In this situation Corsicans, whether working for the State or pushed towards emigration, construct their lives like blood pumped by the heart: pulled back towards their own village, pushed out into the wide world. Some end up as Maoists, others – two at least – presidents of Venezuela, not forgetting the countless civil servants and colonial governors. They had no say in formulating plans for Corsica and played no part in trimming Corsica to the dynamics of Europe.

Paris has fewer problems admitting that Alsace and the Moselle enjoy special rights, or encouraging links between Lille and Brussels, Toulouse and Barcelona. At the same time we deny that the isle of Corsica has a Mediterranean heritage in which Italy plays a major role. Wasn't it Bonaparte himself who, proclaiming the Alpine republic, told the inhabitants of Modena: "I am one of you". Speaking for Corsica it's hard to weep at the death of such imperial designs. I simply underline the lack of any design.

At heart, today's Corsica is the product of a double rejection. Firstly, that of the French state which, having set out during the 1960s to equip Corsica's eastern plain in order to welcome the *pieds noirs* repatriated from Algeria, found itself providing mainly for people of non-Corsican origin. Secondly, that of a Corsican elite many of whom invested in Gaullist power-broking, abandoning any interest in the island itself. It all revolves around the deep Malthusianism of an island where each person rebels against progress, if it benefits his neighbour, yet feels victim – this time the word is apposite – of those who represent him or seek to do so. Trust in the State has been muddled by radicalism, clannism and a cult of violence initiated by nationalists.

In this context it's not surprising that French governments from M. Giscard d'Estaing to M. Chirac, passing by the Mitterand era, have failed in Corsica. From the 1975 flashpoint on the plain of Aléria (two policemen killed) via an uninterrupted cycle of violence

to the 1997 assassination of Prefect Erignac nothing was done. Negotiation was followed by repression, or both were practised together. Attempts by Gaston Defferre, who initiated the present statute for island autonomy, were torpedoed from the Right on the threshold of the Mitterrand era. This Right was allied for the event and, seemingly for ever, with nationalists before it became enmeshed in a maze of local alliances and dubious networks of the rule of law ("État de Droit"), as everyone knows or ought to know.

Today that State is discredited by its top representative, its strongest symbol on the island. As Tacitus said, *corruptio optimi pessima* – the corruption of the best is the worst. The chance to use Claude Erignac's tragic sacrifice to call a halt to violence seems to have been irredeemably wasted. In 1908 the black misery of the Corsican people was denounced by an investigator named Georges Clemenceau: "No country in Europe gives us any clue as to how Corsica will end up", he wrote. Ever since the Republic came into being the reports, which soon became records of powerlessness, poured back to Paris. All attest to an increasing complexity less and less recognised by the "metropole" – as France is called in the overseas territories – which usually stutters between rejection and commiseration.

In trying to distance oneself from both, it should first be admitted that the rule of law has never to this day existed in Corsica. Except, that is, to be considered a territory abandoned to underdevelopment and obsessed with assassination by a State which has always found it easier to handle obstreperous natives by means of those elected locally to do their dirty work, very often experts in voter fraud. *Le Monde* of January 1960 carried a report called "The seaside department" which came to this alarming conclusion. Thus, the day before yesterday's black misery, along with yesterday's lack of projects and the all-too-evident delays in development while mainland France lived its "30 glorious years", all served to nourish a rebirth of Corsican identity and, eventually, the drift of some among them into nationalism.

The responsibility for this of Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, and especially his Interior Minister Michel Poniatowski, can never be stressed enough. Force was deployed at the Aleria vineyard and two gendarmes were killed to bring to heel a bunch of militants who saw themselves as "regionalists" seeking to direct public

attention to the problems of a generation, and to denounce a scandal – the chaptilisation or sweetening of wine – which much later would substantiated by due process of law.

Since 1981, then, both right and left-wing governments have alternated between periods of 'clampdown' and negotiation with the same lack of success. The scene has been aggravated by blunders like that of Michel Rocard who, during the strike which cut off the island in 1989, congratulated himself for "having Corsica at his mercy", or by the sort of provocation which Michel Charasse specialised in.

In any case nobody was able to prevent the slow but inexorable drift downwards of Corsican society, poisoned by endemic violence, dumbfounded by the loss of its commercial markets, of familiar reference points and its traditional job opportunities in the civil service. The law itself never ceased to reflect this general malaise, fed by the specific local difficulties of Corsica – where being a judge, as well as being a prefect, is a dangerous calling – and by contradictory orders from the government of the day. For example, the most recent parliamentary committee of inquiry concluded that "by concentrating on nationalist violence the field has been left free for financial irregularities".

Faced with such a deeply disturbed situation it has to be said that Bonnet's "method", wielding the big stick, was hardly the best. Not that taking the situation into hand wasn't necessary. The first and only real test of the State's credibility on the island is to dismantle the politico-mafiosi network attempting to control life there – where it is not too late to do so. To overcome the natural scepticism of an island used to fluctuation between laxity and repression, the State should avoid making the whole community feel that it must expiate collective guilt, that its own way of life is the cause of the problem, and that each Corsican is a potential police suspect.

The State should ask itself what its mission really is. Essentially, it has an educational role: to love, and to make others love, the law. In this it must treat Corsicans just like any other French people. The whole logic of what has been taking place in Corsica for a year is the opposite: we use the exception to justify a norm which we immediately contradict with our acts. Learning to

love and respect the law means allowing a whole generation tired for the most part of illegal acts to abandon its ways and choose democracy.

The only route out of this impasse is to trust the Corsicans, a people who have never really wished to break their links with the French nation. The separatist debate remains essentially an analogy. The autonomist game, such as it is today, is played in the hope of initiating a huge dialogue along the lines of New Caledonia, establishing a political, economic, social and cultural model which gives the impression of a whole new start. Why not seize this second trauma, in a way the opposite of the first, as a chance to make a fresh start? After all, the nationalists seek an honourable exit while the Right, which largely dominates island politics, has always dreamed of an autonomous, reconciled Corsica.

Trusting the Corsican people means, of course, asking that they respect in turn the cement binding the national community, their birthright. Their most radical representatives must also abandon the practice of exclusion, of xenophobia, towards North Africans and European mainlanders whose only crime has been to bring cultural variety to Corsican society. This little island was once, for a brief moment, the home of cosmopolitan nationalism. It was aware, for only too short a time, that it is itself a mosaic. That's what Jean-Jacques Rousseau endorsed, and we should honour him by returning to it.

JEAN-MARIE COLOMBANI, director of *Le Monde*, wrote the above in 1999 as the introduction to "*Understanding Corsica*" by Jean-Louis Andreani, published by Gallimard in the series *Le Monde Actuel*.