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Martinique/Covid-19

The colonial nature of pandemic management in Martinique has accentuated the people's mistrust

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In Martinique, hit by a particularly deadly fourth wave of Covid-19, the vaccination campaign is struggling to take off. 25.4% of the population has received at least one dose, of which almost 20% have received a complete vaccination regimen. Rates are still low, which place the island among the least vaccinated French territories, along with Guadeloupe and French Guiana. For care home residents, 48.6% have had a first-injection, of which 44.2% have had a complete vaccination regimen. For health professionals, the figures are 30.9% and 21.6, respectively.

Chlordecone, a pesticide harmful to humans, which was used between 1972 and 1993 on Martinique and Guadeloupean banana plantations to control weevils and contaminated 92% of the population. Both islands hold the world record for prostate cancers per capita. Several studies link chlordecone exposure to cancer. This state scandal has accentuated mistrust towards Paris, particularly palpable in recent times. Many people think that the vaccine will poison them like Chlordecone.

But the reluctance does not stop at this fear. Far from the fantasies around “voodoo” and “rum”, the motives run from colonial crimes to the failures of the communication campaign around the health crisis, Philippe Pierre-Charles, a founding member of the Groupe révolution socialiste (Socialist Revolution Group), trade unionist and history teacher, spoke to Yasmine Sellami of Mediapart to dissect the situation.

How do you analyse the discourse explaining the reluctance of the Martinican population towards vaccination by “cultural reasons”?

These are arguments that are very marked by racist prejudices. Like those made by a doctor that Martinicans were allegedly treating themselves with voodoo and rum. Voodoo practically does not exist here, and superstitions are equally present as in other places where the vaccination rate is very high. Our people are educated, and no more irrational than elsewhere. But in the colonial imagination, the colony is the place of magic, ignorance, superstition... a fantasy, without any search for reality.

How do you explain, from a historical point of view, this mistrust of Martinicans towards Paris?

The problem is that, when the dominant are the heirs of slavery and colonial history, and the dominated are the heirs of that same history, but from the other side, this inevitably feeds the mistrust of the latter towards the former. The strong reluctance can therefore be explained by historical reasons. Starting with the sense of injustice fuelled by a large number of unsolved colonial crimes.

For example, in 1971, Gérard Nouvet, a young high school student from Martinique, was killed by a military grenade while going out to see friends. There has never been any official acknowledgement of this crime. The authorities at the time even stated that he had died as a protester and not as a high school student, although he was not demonstrating when he was killed. Later, it was known that the soldier in question had been removed, but nothing more.

Another example, in 1974, in the midst of a strike movement, several protests broke out in Martinique. Two workers were killed. The body of one of them was found lifeless on the beach, in the north of the island. Again, there was no prosecution.

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We can also cite the case of the Martinican journalist André Alier. He was assassinated in 1934 because he was investigating embezzlement by a *béké* [French settler], Eugène Aubéry. He was killed following the publication of his investigation into Aubéry, after several attempts at intimidation and a failed assassination attempt. But the *béké* in question was never sentenced for that. As a result, one of André Alier's brothers took a gun and shot Aubéry. Colonial history is filled with scenarios like these.

Does the trauma of Chlordecone, the harmful pesticide used in Martinique and Guadeloupe between 1972 and 1993 which contaminated 92% of the population of the two islands, play a role in the lack of confidence in the authorities?

That is indeed one of the factors that explains the lack of confidence, yes. What is striking about the Chlordecone case, among other things, is that when the scandal broke, it remained, for several years, a subject that concerned only a few associations and a few lawyers. In 2005, there was the first social forum on the issue. But there was no big popular demonstration, as if this had been inevitable. As if it was in the order of things and there was nothing we could do about it.

In 2018, a second social forum, this time better organized, put the subject back at the heart of the debates. But it was not until 27 February 2021 that the largest demonstration against Chlordecone broke out. It was comparable in scale to that of 2009 [the year of the great general strike against the high cost of living in Martinique and Guadeloupe]. And it only happened when the people of Martinique had the feeling that there was going to be a statute of limitations in this matter. That's when the change of scale took place, because the sense of injustice strengthened. Before, there were a few demonstrations, but they did not attract more than 400 to 500 people.

This risk of prescription has meant that the Martinican people's mistrust of the French state has since manifested itself very strongly. To this is added a small detail, that of the backpedalling by Macron, who, when he came to Martinique, declared that the state must take its responsibilities. Then, during the major debates, during the *Gilets jaunes* movement, it was argued that Chlordecone was not carcinogenic.

Can you identify any other explanations, more recent than the Chlordecone case?

There are several. The first is common to all French territories. It is based on all the inconsistencies held at the highest level of the state at the beginning of the pandemic. Especially on the issue of wearing a mask. One day it is useless, another it becomes mandatory.

Then there is also an inconsistency peculiar to Martinique. In February 2020, it was necessary for the people to mobilize and demonstrate against the arrival of tourists from Italy, where the epidemic was soaring at the time while this was not the case in Martinique. It was the threats from the people that caused the plane to leave; the authorities would have done nothing otherwise.

Once the virus arrived here, there was a disproportion in the measures taken, as if we wanted to make up for past mistakes. The first lockdown took place in a climate of exaggerated terror when we did not have many cases. There has been a series of measures more or less out of time with limited consultation.

The binding nature of vaccination and the obligation to vaccinate, when related to Martinican history and in particular the Chlordecone scandal, inevitably create a terrible effect. People think that if we want to impose something on them, it is because it is not good for them.

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Added to this is the somewhat dismissive attitude towards the local pharmacopoeia. The contempt for local plants presented as witchcraft, as opposed to science, generates a defensive reaction of opposing the chemistry imposed by the state.

What about the communication campaign in Martinique since the beginning of the health crisis?

The colonial nature of pandemic management in Martinique has accentuated the people's mistrust of the authorities. They thought that getting the prefect and the director of the regional health authority to speak would be enough. They were not aware of the level of mistrust among Martinicans.

Another problem is that the measures were taken from Paris. There was even one lockdown, here in Martinique, which was announced not by the prefect but by Macron from the capital of France.

Now that the authorities have been able to see the reluctance of the Martinicans, they wanted to rectify the situation by holding meetings with local elected representatives and asking them to raise awareness among the population. But here again, it doesn't work, because the decisions come from the state and the prefect.

A few days ago, I was in contact with the prefect on behalf of the CDMT [Centrale Démocratique Martiniquaise des Travailleurs, an anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist trade union]. I suggested they organize a confrontation of theses around the policy conducted to fight against Covid. A confrontation under the aegis of people and structures that enjoy the trust of the population. He replied that he was working on something, without specifying what it was.

A few days later, the following information was published in the press: the prefect had set up a citizens' transparency committee. By communicating it in this way, he wanted to show that it was he who decided the thing. Again, this is a typical colonial reflex.

Do local elected representatives have any influence to reassure the Martinican population?

Local elected representatives do not have much influence on the population. We only have to look at the fairly high level of abstention in the territory. The local authority has already taken a stand against compulsory vaccination and against the health pass. It went relatively unnoticed. Criticism from elected officials continues to fall by the wayside because this motion was not accompanied by collective action. It has not led to anything at all.

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