

Haiti: The Price of Sugar

Film Review. The plight of Haitian workers in the plantations in the Dominican Republic

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The Price of Sugar is a powerful documentary about the plight of Haitians toiling on sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic. These workers cross the border from Haiti to labor in conditions that the film's central protagonist, Father Christopher Hartley, calls "quasi-slavery." They are housed in sugar company towns called bateyes. Stripped of identification papers, they cannot legally travel elsewhere in the country.

Hartley is a Spanish priest who came to the Dominican Republic in 1997 and wound up advocating for the cane cutters in his parish. The film gives him plenty of time to voice a thorough, articulate critique of the system which exploits the Haitians. Hartley names the superrich Vicini family as controlling the bateyes; the Vicinis have taken legal action against the film to prevent it from being screened.

It is not surprising that elites profiting from such a system would want the information in this documentary suppressed. According to the 2006 U.S. Department of State Dominican Republic Country Report on Human Rights Practices, "Most bateyes lacked schools, medical facilities, running water, and sewage systems and had high rates of disease. Company-provided housing was sub-standard. Most sugarcane workers were Haitian or of Haitian descent." A worker says on camera that "you just watch your children die of hunger and you can't do anything about it."

A Dominican journalist interviewed by the filmmakers explains, "what the Vicini want, no President's going to deny them." As with a certain Australian media mogul and a network called Fox News, the sugar barons dominate TV and radio airwaves via advertising dollars and direct ownership of outlets. Wealthy elites have used the mass media to spread divide-and-conquer demonization of Haitians, and the high-profile human rights advocate Father Hartley (who tells his parish that according to the second Vatican Council, workers have a right to strike). Poor Dominicans fall for that line, partly, in the words of Father Hartley, because Haitians are "a little bit poorer and a little bit blacker."

Given his humility and solidarity with the poorest of the poor, I suspect Hartley might be uncomfortable with his pre-eminent role in the film. He is certainly a worthy subject and is clearly serious about his commitment to solidarity with the poorest of the poor, and to speaking up for social justice.

But while the film shows Hartley's parents, sister, and brother discussing his childhood and path toward a life in the priesthood, it would have helped to have more context about where his Haitian parishioners came from. Instead, all we are told of Haiti comes via Paul Newman's

voiceover narration, which explains, “Haiti is one of the most dysfunctional countries in the world, rife with poverty and violence.”

As Haiti specialist Paul Farmer explains in thorough detail in his masterful book *The Uses of Haiti*, since Haitians defeated Napoleon’s army in the only successful slave revolution in history, Washington has made sure that Haiti remained a “dysfunctional” state “rife with poverty and violence.” In the late 1980s a grassroots Haitian peoples movement forced an end to the reign of the U.S.-backed father and son dictatorships of “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier. Liberation theologian Jean-Bertrand Aristide emerged as part of this movement and surprised the U.S. by winning the overwhelming majority of the popular vote in 1990. The George H. W. Bush Administration subsequently backed right wing military and paramilitary forces behind the 1991 coup which forced Aristide into exile; in 2004 the George W. Bush Administration orchestrated (with France and Canada) a bloody coup against the second democratically-elected Aristide government.

U.S.-trained paramilitaries launched attacks that began the 2004 coup from safe havens in the Dominican Republic. An April, 2004 *St. Petersburg Times* article on the paramilitaries explained, “They enjoyed the tacit support of the Dominican armed forces. Ever since Aristide had done away with the military in Haiti in 1994, some Dominican generals were worried about their own job security. Without an army next door in Haiti, the traditional enemy of the Dominican Republic, calls were growing in Santo Domingo to slash the size of their own notoriously bloated and corrupt armed forces. The Dominican generals believed that recreating the old military threat next door would boost their relevance.”

As with the 1991 coup, thousands of Aristide supporters were killed under the “interim” anti-Aristide government, and unemployment soared, driving scores of peasants across the border into the D.R.

In Aristide’s 1992 autobiography, a passage on his first government’s pro-poor agenda clarifies another reason why Dominican rightists wanted him gone: “we could no longer tolerate the unspeakable banishments, the flagrant violations of the most elementary rights that were the lot of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. The government of that country had to come to realize that the very recent era in which Jean-Claude Duvalier had sold Haitians like a gang of slaves had been overturned. Never again would our sisters and brothers be exported like merchandise, their blood changed into bitter sugar.”

Pressure on the church succeeded in getting Father Hartley reassigned to Ethiopia in August. Anyone seeing this film will come away extremely concerned about what will happen to the destitute Haitians whose lives Hartley’s high visibility protected while they campaigned with him for better conditions in the Bateyes.

Ben Terral contributes to HaitiAnalysis.com

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