

Prisoners of Sugar

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To be born in Haiti, in 80 percent of cases, means being destined to live under the line of extreme poverty. And in the best of cases, evidently not for very long. Life expectancy is barely above 60 years and the infant mortality rate is ranked as one of the highest in the world. The unemployment sits at around 40 percent and four years after the earthquake, which caused more than 300 thousand deaths and left one million children orphaned, Haiti continuous being the poorest country in the western hemisphere, being placed as one of the last countries in the United Nation's Human Development Index.

So it comes as no surprise then that thousands of Haitians decide to abandon their homeland and loved ones to enter into nearby Dominican Republic, with the hope of finding better living conditions on the other side of the border. However crossing the border is not an easy task, especially when they lacks documents and authorised permits. This is how many start their journey on a sort of Caribbean Calvary marked with violence and pain. The journey that can last several days, sometimes more than a week, is done in small groups. During their pilgrimage towards hope, the migrants are led by Haitian and Dominican human traffickers, often within the sights of corrupt military police officers who promptly demand their "toll". On top of that, if they do not have the money to pay, they are sent back. "We have crossed the borders through the hills, walking..." says Manil, a 33-year-old man, "my feet were worn, bloody... I didn't know it was like this... I have paid a lot of money, five thousand pesos, to come here... I didn't know... the man tells me that I would travel by bus, but it wasn't true, so when we started to walk I tell him that that wasn't the deal, give me back my money, I tell him, I go back to my country, and he says no, that we were nearly there... and we kept on walking three more days... eight days in total, with nothing, only water, without eating...".

The majority of Haitian migrants don't know what awaits them once the border has been crossed. The dream of a well payed job and the hope of a new future drives away the worries, making bearable the suffering and the abuses endured during the long journey. But it is a dream destined to be broken very soon. Lack of documents exposes the immigrants to conditions not very different to those that their slave ancestors were subjected to. The most powerful symbols of this harsh reality are the *bateyes*, agglomerations of dormitories scattered within the immense sugar cane plantations. These are created to accommodate workers during the cane harvest, the *zafra*, but with time they have become truly invisible communities, emblems of poverty and marginalisation. An inheritance of the original places that were similar to concentration camps not so long ago, the *bateyes* are still social and economic ghettos reserved for the Haitian population. Here is where the human



tragedy is perpetrated against the workers forced to survive day by day in conditions on the brink of endurance and human dignity. Crowded into these big dormitories, men, women and children share narrow and run-down spaces, without window, electricity and running water, sleeping on the floor or on improvised bunk beds on foam mattresses. They are the prisoners of sugar, helpless victims of a system of work based on deception and deprivation.

Before the start of the *zafra*, the harvest time when the various sugar companies are in search of a cheap labour force, the promises offered to workers are truly tempting: good salaries, paid holidays, production bonuses, social insurance, severance pay, etc. In this way, many Haitians become hopeful of an easy way to earn. The reality, however, is shortly revealed to be very different.

The days in the *bateyes* start at four in the morning. The harvest workers wake up before sunrise to make the most of rare cooler periods that occur at these latitudes. There is no time for breakfast. Machetes must be sharpened; a delicate and thorough operation that takes several minutes. Afterwards, they get some water and wait for the company bus. Before six, the plantations surrounding the *bateyes* are invaded by the small army of Haitians that commit themselves to a daily war with the sugar cane. The job of the choppers, the cutters, is hard, tiring and dangerous work. Not long afterwards, the sun reaches its zenith and the humidity becomes unbearable. The dust lifted by the hacks of the machetes fill the eyes and the throat. The sweat drenches the clothes and the hunger devours the stomachs. It is not uncommon that a moment of negligence or the occasional failing of strength lead to some accident. With an extremely fatalist view of life, the labourers show their battle scars without emphasis, with the nonchalance of one who has resigned to the inevitable.

Work is undertaken for up to ten to twelve hours a day with no breaks, often including Sundays, to cut as many canes as possible. There is no such thing as a written contract, and even less, a fixed wage. Pay is according to quantity of tones accumulated, but the price is never clear to anyone and the calculations are never revealed, "they give you what they want", they all say, "it does not matter how much you have worked, they give you what they want because you cannot complain... because if you complain, you cannot work... and if you cannot work, you cannot eat". The logic is perverse, but it is also untouchable. The result is silence. This is how the workers accept any quantity that is given to them, submitting to the sheer caprice of a system of extortion made possible by the lack of possible alternatives. Indeed, the sugar cane represents an exclusive and totalitarian monopoly, concentrated in the hands of a few consortiums that share a hefty oligopoly.

As a consequence, when the farm workers return to the *batey*, all they have gained is an equivalent of only a few dollars, barely enough for a bowl of rice and a handful of beans; sufficient – perhaps – to survive another day. Furthermore, there are a significant number



of workers who faced with far-too-large families to care for and unexpected costs, especially medicines, end up being severely indebted, starting a vicious cycle that with time becomes harder to break, like invisible chains attached to the feet of the new slaves. As time passes, reality manifests itself with all its harshness. Of the promises given at the beginning of the *zafra*, there is only the reproach of a distant echo; an eternal return of the collective memory betrayed with impunity. Despicable salaries, inhumane working conditions, nonexistent health insurance, occupational illness, deceptions, threats and violence: these are the sad events that mark the rhythm of time in the *bateyes*, where the rights have no citizens. Perhaps because citizens are not found there.

The fact is, the problem of documents in the *bateyes*, as well as in the rest of the country, is of fundamental importance, especially for the children of Haitian parents born in the Dominican territory. Up to 2010, the national Constitution stated that the acquisition of citizenship could be attained *ius sanguinis* or through *ius soli*, but since that year, a new law decreed that entitlement by blood would be the only criterion. Furthermore, the law has been applied retrospectively starting from 1929, effectively denationalising and making thousands of people stateless, with all the corresponding consequences: inability to access education, public health, work, in other words, to civil life within the country. Thus, creating a highly discriminatory and dangerous situation, a derivative of far-right minority politics that are fed by grudges that are old and historical, but which have a very strong influence of the material life of entire families.

It is hypothesised that the number of Haitians in the Dominican Republic lies between 500 thousand to one million, although the estimates are difficult to verify as the majority of them do not enjoy an official legal status. Clearly, a situation



that favours the emergence and perpetuation of “protected zones”, such as the *bateyes*, which on the one hand guarantee the farm workers a chance of survival without the fear of deportation and repatriation, and on the other, is precisely why they constitute a precious reserve of highly productive manpower that is easily exploited.

Arriving with the illusion of working the seven to eight months of the *zafra* to later return to Haiti to their families with a little money in their pockets, the farm workers end up spending the rest of their lives in the *bateyes*, condemned to pay a huge price for having naively believed in the dream of a better future. To save just a few dollars for the return trip is a privilege of the few lucky ones that nevertheless reluctantly decide to stay due to the embarrassment and the shame of returning empty-handed after so long. *Zafra* after *zafra*, year after year, the hopes of returning to see their loved ones again dwindle, making way for a sort of routine of resignation. And so, in the dark mist which proceeds dawn, as in a never-ending war, with machete in hand, they prepare one more time to face the sugar cane that, indifferently to all, continues to grow.

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