

Haiti's Untold Betrayal

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PEJ News - Kevin Pina - The bigger problem that is behind violence and political unrest in Haiti is the country's tiny wealthy elite. It is their social class and the way they do business that is responsible for the huge chasm that divides them from the majority of the country who are desperately poor. The reality is that 5% of the population controls 60% of the collective wealth, and the top 1% controls 50% - while 80% of Haiti's citizens live on less than two dollars per day. All of the interventions by the international community and the U.N. are not altering this fundamental relationship, to the contrary, they are protecting and enabling the wealthy elite to continue business as usual. They are allowing this elite to institutionalize its position and control of Haitian society today in the name of free-market capitalism and this concept of neo-liberal economics.

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Kevin Pina/ Marian Peleski

PEJ News

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Documentary filmmaker and independent journalist Kevin Pina was recently interviewed by Marian Peleski about his work and current events unfolding in Haiti. Peleski is a frequent host of "Progressive Voices" which is heard every Monday evening on WVUD, 91.3 FM from the University of Delaware in Newark.

MP: You produced the documentary film "Haiti: The Untold Story" to tell the story of human rights abuse in Haiti. How did you get involved with Haiti?

KP: I have been a documentary filmmaker for more than twenty-five years now. My first film was called "El Salvador: In the Name of Democracy," and was basically a film to combat the Reagan administration's propaganda. While they were releasing so-called White Papers purporting that the FMLN were puppets of the Soviet Union and godless communists deserving of death, I was working to bring a human face to the Salvadoran struggle for justice. "El Salvador: In the Name of Democracy" was the result.

I then went on to work with Mark Kitchell as one of the producers of "Berkeley in the Sixties" which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary in 1990. Following

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that I was brought in as a producer by Glenn Switkes and Monte Acuirre to help them complete their documentary "Amazonia: Voices from the Rainforest." Each of these documentaries dealt with issues of social justice and human rights which over time developed into the overarching interest and theme of my documentary work.

Haiti was a natural progression. Her story first attracted my attention because of the parallels I saw between Archbishop Romero and Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, especially their adherence to Liberation Theology and working on behalf of the poor. The greatest similarity between them was their courage in challenging the status quo, taking on Washington-backed elites and Pentagon-armed and trained militaries. They also posed the question of whether free market capitalism was really free if it resulted in perpetuating economic elites whose true nature was monopolistic. How could you call it free if the end result was to entrench a social class that resorts to the use of violence to protect their wealth and privilege against competition and demands of the poor majority for justice? These were questions central to the work and legacies of Romero and Aristide and I couldn't help but draw comparisons between Haiti and El Salvador.

About this time, I also began studying Haiti's history in earnest and was struck by the depth of the historical relationship this tiny nation had with the United States. From before Haiti's independence, the slaves were seen as threat, and for good reason, the U.S. was a slave holding nation whose wealth and stability absolutely depended on trade in human chattel. It was in defense of this evil that the U.S. Senate of 1806 declared Haiti "the greatest threat to U.S. interests at home and abroad." They were right in fearing the example of Haiti's slave revolution as it inspired other slave revolts such as those undertaken by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, Nat Turner and the white abolitionist John Brown. Haiti's existence established an institutional fear in the halls of power in the U.S. that would lead to a crippling economic blockade of the country that lasted for more than half a century. Its effects were felt well after Haiti was finally recognized by the administration of President Abraham Lincoln in 1862.

Haiti is also where the longest U.S. military occupation in history occurred from 1915-1934. The point is that once I started researching this incredible history I couldn't stop. So when Aristide became a candidate for the presidency in 1990 I was determined to make a documentary about Haiti and that developed into "Haiti: Harvest of Hope." It was my attempt to give an accounting of the history of the movement known as Lavalas, translated as flash flood from Kreyol, that would catapult Aristide into the presidency in 1990. That documentary covered the context of Lavalas's formation, namely the Duvalier dictatorship and the corruption in the Catholic church, Aristide's electoral campaign, his first six months in office and the brutal military coup which followed.

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During the production of "Harvest" many people I knew personally were killed or forced into exile...it was a nightmare. In 1993 I survived an attempt to kill me that resulted in the accidental shooting of a Haitian Senator. The Cedras dictatorship then accused me of the attempted assassination of the Senator and expelled me from Haiti. I was able to return to Haiti when Aristide was restored to office in 1994.

In 1998, I decide to make a sequel to "Harvest." I determined that to do this would require me moving to Haiti which I did in January 1999 and lived there until February 2006. I now have more that 200 hours of material I videotaped during this period including the second ouster of Aristide in Feb. 2004 and the human rights nightmare that followed. It was this latter material that became the basis of my latest documentary films "Haiti: The UNTold Story" and "Haiti: We Kill the Bandits." The title for "Bandits" comes from a quote by a Brazilian general who was the head of the UN military mission for a time, Heleno Ribera.

MP: Is the UN helping to legitimize human rights violations in Haiti?

KP: The truth is that the UN's role, following Aristide's ouster in Feb. 2004, was to insure there was no armed resistance to the violent campaign waged by the Haitian police to repress the Lavalas movement. At the same time the U.N. did provide legitimacy to the U.S.-installed government that was responsible for that same police force as well as the judiciary that was responsible for holding political prisoners affiliated with the Lavalas movement. It became clear they were not acting as a neutral and independent force in Haiti. Quite the contrary. They took credit for training the police and reforming the judiciary at the very moment these institutions were involved in this campaign of repression against Lavalas. On the one hand they would pat themselves on the back and give themselves medals for their assistance to the police and the judiciary while on the other they would wash their hands of any responsibility for the human rights violations being committed by those very same institutions. It was the height of hypocrisy and enabled the most reactionary forces in Haiti to literally get away with murder under the cover of a U.N. mandate.

Ultimately, the U.N. role would go far beyond just legitimizing human rights violations in Haiti. The UN actually stands accused of targeting unarmed civilians in Cite Soleil on July 6, 2005. There have also been documented cases of indiscriminate shooting by UN forces in Cite Soleil since. They have denied it and have tried to spin it so as to cover it up but the evidence of a massacre committed by U.N. forces in Cite Soleil on July 6, 2005 is incontrovertible.

MP: What about help from Amnesty International?

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KP: Initially, AI was out of the picture and unresponsive to the situation in Haiti by virtue of their reliance on a partisan anti-Lavalas organization for their information on the ground. AI relied heavily upon the National Coalition for Haitian Rights or NCHR who were the same ones falsely accusing people of crimes to justify their killing and incarceration. For all intents and purposes, NCHR served as a network of rubber-stamp police informants for the interim regime of Gerard Latortue. They manufactured evidence of crimes to justify arresting and/or holding individuals in what was called prolonged detention, which was really code for locking them up without ever having an honest trial and throwing away the key. There were other politically motivated human rights "experts" like Jean-Claude Bajeaux who fed AI false information but it was primarily NCHR. When AI finally did send a delegation in April 2004 they even went so far as to use the same language as NCHR to describe the situation. I remember they used the word "chimere" in their report to describe armed groups they claimed were loyal to Aristide and the Lavalas movement. This word was a highly partisan term used by those who supported Aristide's ouster, especially NCHR, to create a climate of terror and fear after Feb. 2004. Anyone accused of being a "chimere" was marked for death or imprisonment without trial. Yet here was AI, a purportedly independent human rights organization, using the same politically charged language. I found it disgraceful.

I also remember challenging AI representatives to declare Annette Auguste, arrested by U.S. marines on May 10, 2004, a political prisoner one month after her arrest. They argued that they could not because they had "reliable" information she was involved in fomenting violence against Aristide opponents. I demanded to know who gave them that information and they claimed they could not reveal their sources. I knew it was coming from Pierre Esperance and Marie Yolene Gilles of NCHR because they were making the rounds on local radio programs with the same accusations. It wasn't until Jan. 2006 that AI officially designated Auguste a political prisoner after she had already spent 20 months in prison. Auguste was finally released on Aug. 14, 2006 and all of the false charges leveled against her were dropped. Had AI realized earlier they had been receiving false information from politically motivated organizations and individuals in Haiti it could have made a tremendous difference.

In all fairness AI was not alone in this. The same can be said for Human Rights Watch and the U.N. Human Rights Office in Haiti. In the case of AI they finally woke up to the reality of having the wool pulled over their eyes and have since responded in a credible and accountable manner. Still, the fact that this could happen in the middle of intense political repression, that a voice as important as AI's could be manipulated, is an important lesson for all of us concerned with human rights.

MP: Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Is anything being done to improve their standard of living?

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KP: There has been hundreds of millions of dollars of international funding pumped into Haiti since Aristide's ouster. I would have to say honestly that it has not discernibly improved the lot of the majority of the poor in Haiti.

The bigger problem that is behind violence and political unrest in Haiti is the country's tiny wealthy elite. It is their social class and the way they do business that is responsible for the huge chasm that divides them from the majority of the country who are desperately poor. The reality is that 5% of the population controls 60% of the collective wealth, and the top 1% controls 50% - while 80% of Haiti's citizens live on less than two dollars per day. All of the interventions by the international community and the U.N. are not altering this fundamental relationship, to the contrary, they are protecting and enabling the wealthy elite to continue business as usual. They are allowing this elite to institutionalize its position and control of Haitian society today in the name of free-market capitalism and this concept of neo-liberal economics.

The truth is that Haiti's wealthy elite are not competitors in a free market, they are monopolists who have shown time and time again they are willing to resort to violence and corruption to protect their interests. And Haiti isn't really a free market anyway, it's a captive market of 8.5 million souls.

There is very little wealth and surplus being created in Haiti and most people are able to survive because their hard working families and friends living abroad are sending them remittances of over one billion dollars a year. So in reality these so-called free market capitalists are really competing over their share of these remittances and not new wealth being generated in Haiti.

Now add to this the fact that rice and beans is the staple of the Haitian diet as it is in most Latin American and Caribbean countries and that most of it is imported from abroad. Local production of staples has been decimated because Haitian farmers cannot compete with large agro-businesses in places like California, Idaho and Montana who receive large government subsidies and can churn out cheaper products. Now imagine you control the monopoly on the importation of these goods into Haiti, everyone has to eat and you control the market. That's what I mean by a captive market as opposed to a free market. And where does the money come from for families to buy your product? It comes from remittances, money sent by family and friends abroad to their loved ones to keep them from starving. And what happens to the profit from that money? Does it stay in Haiti where the elite reinvests it in infrastructure, pays their taxes, creates new businesses and jobs? No, it goes back to where it came from. Back to the United States where it is used to buy luxury properties, start off-shore businesses, to pay for lawyers, lobbyists and accountants or sits in a bank

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interest.

This is what I have seen to be the reality of Haitian economics and one of the fundamental causes of instability in the country. What the U.S. and the international community are doing is attacking the resistance to this unjust system by labeling Aristide and Lavalas as proponents of violence and class warfare. At the same time they are insuring that the way in which the wealthy elite does business, to which this resistance grew as a response, remains intact. This why I believe it is not a question of if but when this situation will deteriorate and unravel once again. They can pump as much money and aid into Haiti as they want but if they do not change the habits and business practices of this wealthy elite, the majority of the poor will rise up once again.

And remember when you talk about the Haitian people today, the poor majority in Haiti, you are talking about one of the most politicized populations in the world. I believe most Haitians see themselves locked in moral and spiritual combat against this wealthy elite and by extension, the international community. For them it is a question of controlling their own destiny and having their right to choose their own government respected. The Haitian struggle for social justice is far from over and will continue long after the U.N. decides to pull out.

MP: If all we hear are lies about Haiti, how and where can we find the truth?

KP: I'm not sure everything we hear about Haiti is all lies. You'd have to qualify that. If your talking about the international corporate media, on whom most rely for information about Haiti, I'd say at least 80% of it is representing the official line and dominant paradigm of the U.S. State Department. I'd say only about 20% of the reporting by institutions like Reuters and the Associated Press represents an authentic voice of a sincere journalist doing their best to get out the truth. If you are talking about the Haitian media, most of which is owned by the elite, about 50% of their reporting represents the State Department line while the other 50% represents their reactionary class interests under the facade of a false nationalism.

In this day and age of embedded journalism and a blurring of the concept of conflict of interest in reporting, we have to turn more and more to independent voices on the ground. The reporting of Dahr Jamail in Iraq is an example, the reporting of John Ross from Mexico, Robert Fisk from the Middle East are other examples of what I consider solid reporting. I served in the role of citizen journalist from Haiti for the last three years on Flashpoints, a program heard everyday on

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KPFA, the flagship station of the Pacifica Network. There is still excellent reporting about Haiti coming out of Flashpoints and people can tune in every weekday at 5 p.m. PST on the internet by going to www.flashpoints.net .

Amy Goodman's program does a decent job of trying to keep up with major developments concerning Haiti. So there are better sources out there than the steady stream of corporate media dispatches and analysis.

MP: Are you writing a book about Haiti?

KP: I am and it's scheduled to be released next summer to coincide with my fourth documentary project on Haiti, "The Betrayal of Democracy." One thing I have learned is that if you don't take responsibility to write history others will do it for you and most will not represent your perspective. I devoted the last 15 years of my life to understanding Haiti and most of that was spent focusing on the struggles of the poor majority. While others were demonizing the Lavalas movement and most journalists were staying away, I found myself building bonds with folks in communities like Martissant, Cite Soleil and Bel Air. I documented most of the experience on video but I now find the medium limited in terms of all the information I want to include to relate my experiences in Haiti. I have been collecting images, stories, anecdotes and research for a long time now and I'd like to put it all together in a book so that I can share it with others. It has been a special privilege to be entrusted by Haitian brothers and sisters with the opportunity to gather all this information about their struggle for social justice. I want to honor their trust and share the experience by putting it in the public record.