

**The  
BLACK  
C o M M e n t a t o r**  
Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
www.blackcommentator.com

*Issue 162 – December 8, 2005*

*Think Piece*  
*Obituary: The Late (not-so-Great) King Sugar*  
*by John Maxwell*

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly Version



Copyright © 2002 - 2005  
www.BlackCommentator.com  
All Rights Reserved

The decomposing corpse of the West Indian sugar plantation system was officially certified dead last month, half a century after it had ceased to show signs of life.

The declaration was greeted, as such declarations generally are, by much weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The 18 African/Caribbean/Pacific (ACP) countries which are most affected, have lost a pillar of the slave-owning community, a system which has supported for five hundred years the dehumanization, degradation and inhuman subjection of millions of people, mainly of African descent.

In our parts of the world, sugar is more than an industry. It is the living ghost of the slave system under which between 18 and 30 million people were transported across the Atlantic, their lives, families, communities and cultures destroyed, to produce wealth for capitalists in Britain, Europe and the United States.

It was the acme of human parasitism.

And it has taken an unconscionably long time to die.

Among the reasons for its longevity are its offspring, among them: modern capitalism, the Industrial revolution, the rotary newspaper press, the steam engine, the railway, the proletarianization and dehumanization of millions of people in Europe and elsewhere. And it is this which makes the plaintive bleats of the bereaved so heart rending. A man would need a heart of stone not to laugh, as somebody once said.

According to the ACP countries, the European Union's cutting of the Gordian umbilical cord will bring in its train a host of disasters for ACP sugar supplying states "and inevitably lead to the destruction of centuries old traditions of sugar production with devastating socio-economic consequences."

I don't know about the devastating socio-economic consequences, but I do know that we are all well rid of

## The Black Commentator – Think Piece: Obituary – The Late King Sugar

the “centuries–old traditions of sugar production.” I cannot believe that this argument could ever form part of an appeal by any self–respecting ex–colonial – but it is the official position of the ACP countries. According to them:

It is estimated that the [European] Commission's proposal would lead to a loss in income of up to €400 million annually in ACP countries. the knock on effects of this reform, which hardly bear contemplating, would include:

- macro–economic instability
- the crippling of national efforts to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals
- the closure of countless estates
- the complete undermining of modernization efforts already underway within the sugar industry
- the failure of smallholders' cooperatives and collapse of local farmers' banks
- massive unemployment, rural instability and urban migration
- a dramatic and alarming increase in poverty
- increased crime
- national destabilization in all ACP countries and heightened insecurity in the Caribbean region
- environmental degradation

If all this were true it would indeed be tragic, except that the foolish virgins of the ACP have known for nearly forty years that this day would come and did nothing to prepare for it.

If they had had the imagination and the will to act to defend the interests of the ordinary people, the poor, they would not, as Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson has done, concentrate on improving the confidence and bank accounts of the rich at the expense of the poor; they would not, as Mr. Patterson has done, undertake billion US dollar infrastructure programs to build new highways when what was needed was to build the social infrastructure for human development and to reduce poverty, inequality, crime and violence.

### **Get a Life!**

For five hundred years, the best land in Jamaica and in the ACP countries has been sequestered by the agents of Diabetes Inc. to produce a “good” which has no food value, although it is classed as a food. The best agricultural land is held in latifundia, all over the ACP countries, starving the peasants whose forefathers made the latifundistas wealthy, in a social system which destroys families, corrupts, depraves and devastates community and erodes and devalues social capital.

Before now I have said that growing sugar cane in Jamaica is as appropriate as it would be for the Jews to make bakeries out of the ovens of Auschwitz and Dachau.

Because of sugar and its sequestration of land and power, parasitic elites, providing money lending and merchandising services to the industry, have grown up in turn to batten off the surplus labor of the peasants and to despise them privately, as they do explicitly to the Haitians, as incapable of governing themselves.

## The Black Commentator – Think Piece: Obituary – The Late King Sugar

This, incidentally, is a rich irony, as anyone who has read anything by me over the last year or so will realize, and as some scholars such as Sibylle Fischer, Verene Shepherd and Clinton Hutton are pointing out, the modern world had its genesis in the Caribbean where the Haitians were the first to declare and implement the fundamental, inalienable human rights of every human being.

But the elites – and their honorary brothers-in-office – have always been lazy, have always been able to rely on the softness of heart of their European patrons. When it came to the crunch, the metropole would never let them down. Of course they don't count what happened upon the abolition of slavery because although they thought the empire niggardly, the owners at least were recompensed for slavery while the slaves were not.

Four decades ago, then Prime Minister of Jamaica, Alexander Bustamante, arrived at my workplace, the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation, to demand that I be dismissed, fired, because I had dared to expose a truth: that the British, after exploiting us for 300 years, were leaving us with the munificent gift of the Jamaican army headquarters – which they could not take with them – and enough money to service the government for 11 days. It was *lese majeste* to speak like that.

What I had forgotten to say at the time was that the British had “forgotten” to return a quarter of a million pounds they “borrowed” from us during the war, and had not recognized the blood sacrifice of Jamaicans killed in Imperial service in West Africa, in the Boer War, in both World Wars, or to even say they were sorry about the hundreds of thousands they had sacrificed in slavery in Jamaica and the millions elsewhere.

As the people of Colombia and Peru are now being punished for the American addiction to cocaine, so were we punished for the European addiction to sugar. Ask the Cubans about the Platt Amendment which yoked them to sugar in perpetuity to the US in order to finance the Cuban elite and the Mafia, but which, when it came to the crunch in 1960, was found to be dispensable, no matter how much hardship its abrogation would cause the ordinary human beings whose production and labor and humanity were devalued at a stroke – by one flourish of President Eisenhower's pen.

Much of the best land Jamaica has been effectively idle for decades. As Mr. R.F. Innes, then Director of Research for the Sugar Manufacturers Association said in 1963, Jamaica could be producing then, at least 30% more sugar on the land the estates occupied. Since then production has declined by 70%, but the land is still sequestered from the people who earned it by their tears, sweat, blood and their suffering, their misery and their dehumanization.

Meanwhile, as Cuba was doing in 1960, Jamaica is doing now; we are importing tomatoes and cabbage and eggs and bread and water and sugar and you name it from the United States and the people who used to grow or make those things are selling hairpins and boxes of matches by the roadside. They are self-employed entrepreneurs – just like the elite.

During the war, Jamaica could not import food from abroad because all the cargo space available was needed for the war effort. The problem was solved by a functionary called (with bureaucratic felicity), The Competent Authority. This worthy simply decreed that ten percent of all sugar lands be planted in food crops.

Now, while in Florida, farmers will produce US\$60 million worth of citrus on land equivalent to the acreage occupied by the Monymusk and New Yarmouth sugar estates; in Jamaica we stare vacantly and dream about riches from the land now overgrown in bush.

While sugar was king, even when, as recently it was a king in exile, it has always been able to prevent Jamaicans from taking action to save themselves, to rescue, rehabilitate and educate their children and to create caring communities in which crime would be the outsider's game.

## The Black Commentator – Think Piece: Obituary – The Late King Sugar

We have always known, for instance, why people steal farm produce – praedial larceny it is called here, but we have never attempted to understand how we could get the malefactors to grow their own food and so increase the size of the national bread.

Sugar is the antidote to thought.

Sugar is a specific against imagination, against everything except money and depravity. It incites hyperactivity, noise and mindless idleness.

It is time for us to go cold turkey. To kick the habit.

To end the addiction and to go to work for ourselves and our people

### A ‘Heck’ of a World

On Tuesday, my email was suddenly populated by spam of a peculiarly sinister sort. Under a variety of inducements, these emails instructed me to open an attachment. I didn't obey the summons. Instead I went to my menu, found the "long header" option and redirected the email to ([abuse@xxx.com](mailto:abuse@xxx.com)), the internet service provider from whose domains they had come. One or two thanked me, although one replied huffily, that I had sent them a forbidden type of attachment. That ISP was probably one of those inundated by the Sober worm, which was what my emails contained. Because I didn't open the suspect emails, my computer was neither affected by the virus nor could it dispatch copies of it to my correspondents, as did the computers of those unwise enough to open the attachments.

I bring this up because the person who sent the worm obviously knows a little psychology. Most people who get an email saying it is from the FBI or CIA and alleging that the users have visited “illegal websites” are almost certain to open the attachment. In normal times some of us would have opened the emails anyway, simply out of an ingrained sense of guilt. But I believe the reason this worm spread so fast was that so many people have lost confidence in their governments and are afraid of them, afraid that in this age of War Against Terrorism, they may have unwittingly entrapped themselves and thus need to plea bargain with their minders.

If that is true, it is a frightening index of how the war on Terror has corrupted all of us, from the functionaries of the state to the poor, inoffensive non-journalist who is simply out to have fun on the Internet.

Of course, he or she will have read about the British government invoking the Official Secrets Act to ban any further disclosures about President Bush's reported desire to bomb Al Jazeera.

Of course, if the story were not true, it would not be an Official Secret, would it?

We really do live in a hell (oops! "Heck") of a world.

*John Maxwell of the University of the West Indies (UWI) is the veteran Jamaican journalist who in 1999 single-handedly thwarted the Jamaican government's efforts to build houses at Hope, the nation's oldest and best-known botanical gardens. His campaigning earned him first prize in the 2000 Sandals Resort's annual Environmental Journalism Competition, the region's richest journalism prize. He is also the author of How to Make Our Own News: A Primer for Environmentalists and Journalists (Jamaica, 2000). Mr. Maxwell can be reached at [jonmax@mac.com](mailto:jonmax@mac.com).*

Copyright©2005John Maxwell