

# THE SUGAR CANE HOLOCAUST

## The ethanol academic road-show is in town

Brazil's Ethanol Academic Road Show is travelling the world to encourage you to believe in myths about Brazil's ethanol for export being clean, sustainable energy for the rich world's cars, reports Padre **TIAGO THORLBY**, who works in a sugar cane zone. But don't expect them to tell you the truth when they have never been near a canefield or talked with any of the hundreds of thousands of families evicted from the land. Don't expect the academics to tell you the Brazilian model used to produce ethanol from sugar cane is environmentally devastating, culturally genocidal, socially exclusive, politically retrograde and economically unviable.

I come from Europe, a continent where all children born after 1945 should have been given a tag on their wrists with the inscription: "and no-one spoke against it." Time after time, they would learn the significance of the words and how a nation was almost exterminated by the Holocaust. Since then, there have been more holocausts, which might not have happened if the tag bearers had acted on the significance of the attachment on their wrists.

Holocausts are 'OK' – so long as they don't *involve* me, or I can push the *blame* onto someone else ... or I can *distance* myself from them. I can *handle* that type of Holocaust.

### Cars causing a holocaust

What happens when the cause of the Holocaust is right between your legs, the most intimate part of the body? I am, of course, talking about that extended member of the body: the gas tank of the motor vehicle.

What happens when I hear my car is causing a Holocaust? No problem: I believe in anything told-sold to the car-user about the energy used to power the vehicle. That is why the Brazilian 'Ethanol Academic Road-Show' is in town. It's here to give you a feel-good factor about ethanol produced by the Brazilian latifundiary model. The academic road-show is geared to make you believe. The propaganda is very convincing. Goebbels would be proud.

To say the energy produced by this model is 'clean, sustainable' is an attack on Nature and a crime against those who are expelled from the land to make way for this green desert

Thus: I believe my vehicle, using bio-energy, is using 'clean fuel', 'sustainable energy'. Pure myth and lies! The Brazilian model used to produce ethanol from sugar cane is environmentally devastating, culturally genocidal, socially exclusive, politically retrograde, economically unviable.

To fuel the myth and cater for the lies, Biodiversity – the insects, fishes, streams, the woods, the animals, the skies ... the sounds and perfumes of nature are devastated. The people who live and work on the land: devastated. Goodbye to all that and to all expectations of Land Reform in Brasil. Goodbye to the fertile fields for Food Sovereignty, fields inundated by the advance of the green ocean of sugar cane. Pacha-Mama ... devastated. Mother Earth does she never tire at the prospect of endlessly sustaining the whimsical needs of her mindless children?

I belong to an ecumenical Church organization called Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT (The Land Pastoral Commission). People ask: what is the posi-



[Photo: flickr/lynac]

tion of the CPT on the bio-combustible question? The answer: the CPT is in favour of bio-energy. Peasants have been using it from time immemorial to keep themselves warm, to cook their foods and to sit around at night to brighten the conversations. For the CPT, this is the real bio-energy, the sustainable bio-fuel, the clean bio-combustible energy. This is Life – *bio* (greek).

### Agro-energy not bio-energy

Why then, the person asks, is the CPT so against ethanol? Firstly, the CPT is against the latifundary-for-export model that produces ethanol. This is not bio (life)-energy. It is agro-energy. In fact, the CPT goes further: it is necro (death)-energy. The Brazilian sugar cane model produces sugar with the taste of blood. This sugar cane, transformed into ethanol, rusts the tanks! It is sugar produced from the humiliation of the sugar cane cutters, obliged to work in conditions analogous to slave labour. It is sugar produced at the cost of the devastation of bio-diversity.

To say the energy produced by this model is ‘clean’, ‘sustainable’ is an attack on Nature and a crime against those expelled from the land to make way for this green desert. Right now, those involved in selling Brazil’s ethanol product to the world are on a road-show, travelling the world. They are academics who have never set foot in sugar cane fields beyond the reach of the tarmac. They are academics being paid well for their services, paid to talk about the shining-bright, glowing-light of the white, crystalised sugar and the other product, ethanol. These academics have never seen the sugar cane invading the forest, burning the mangroves, destroying the fauna, poisoning the rivers. They are paid well to circulate the myths and mendacity of the sugar cane production model.

The real bill, however, is footed by those who suffer from sugar cane expansion. It is not just Mother Nature that suffers. The sons and daughters of Mother Nature suffer: the sugar cane cutters, exploited at work in the plantations in the same year the 200th anniversary of ‘the end of slavery’ is celebrated. The children of Mother Nature suffer, those with small-holdings and homesteads who are expelled from their land for sugar cane production to the urban peripheries and favelas (shanty towns). There they languish often among great violence. The people are humiliated, as one young woman said: “we were in heaven and they evicted us to hell.”

Hundreds of thousands of families are evicted from the land. You won’t hear the academic road-show talking about them! They will be talking about

Rocinha, the biggest favela (shanty-town) in South America, with about 200,000 inhabitants. [Photo: flickr/andreasnilsson1976]



ethanol, how it’s ‘clean’, ‘sustainable’ for my intimate extended member body part.

### Ethanol expansion ends land reform

But: agro-fuel for whom? Who really benefits from agro-fuels? If it’s so lucrative, why does it need such vast investments? When will these investments be paid back into the public coffers from where they were borrowed? Pernambuco sugar barons owe US\$4 billion to the public, that’s a 1998 figure as it’s impossible to get more up to date numbers, why’s that?! This ethanol programme in Brasil, based on the latifundary model in existence since the country was invaded by the Portuguese, effectively ends all hopes of Land Reform in the country. For this reason too, this agro-energy project is a full frontal attack on the nation’s Food Sovereignty.

A recently published book, *Planet of Slums*, describes the situation. Dragging its feet, the UN agrees with the book’s findings but it was slow to respond to the subject as the UN supports Brazil’s model for sugar/ethanol production. I don’t have to read the book. The reality is what I see in my daily work with CPT in the ‘Sugar Cane Zone’ of Pernambuco. There are now sugar cane dormitory towns encircling the sugar cane fields. Visitors to the area are surprised to see sugar cane coming through the windows of a house, or waving over the wall of a cemetery, or creeping up against the side of a church or chapel. The majority of workers in the sugar cane fields are those evicted from their small-holdings by a production model that controls the legislative, judiciary and executive powers. The workers leave their favela homes in the dormitory

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towns from 3–4 am to set off to work, returning from 5–6 pm. They are unrecognizable, blackened by the burnt sugar cane, the soot and dust.

The academic road-show that tours Europe will say the sugar cane workers are well treated, that there are ‘field-restaurants’ and ‘field-toilets’ for them. Get away from the high-way, climb beyond the first hill to see what work conditions are really like. It is no exaggeration to say while some are ‘dying to work’, others die working. These are the ‘lucky’ ones. The ‘bagasse of the sugar cane’ – the human remains of those who are no longer able to endure this work or any work, vegetate in a pitiable existence, worn out by their brief work life, hiding in their homes, ashamed they are no longer fit to work.

What of the migrant workers who left kith and kin to cut sugar cane in the south of the country, travelling thousands of kilometres, hoping to find something better? At best, they return disillusioned by conditions in the sugar cane fields of the ‘modern’ south of Brasil. At worst, they are never able to afford to return. They become ‘the highway peasant’, eking out a living, struggling for survival, as best they can. Did the academic road-show interview any of these people?

#### Nature dying

Indeed, did they interview the bees, a dying species, faced with agro-chemicals used to produce ‘clean’ energy? Did these same academics try to sample a succulent shrimp or a tasty crab after the sugar mill released toxic stillage in the local waters? While they extol the wondrous virtues of ethanol from Brasil, do they ever tell of their wonder at seeing sugar cane planted right into mangrove areas? Many things will be heard from the academic road-show in their tour of Europe and the U.S. – but don’t expect them to exhibit much sincerity with the truth.

Bees, tiny insects, animals large and small, fishes, shellfish, are given short shrift. Don’t expect the road-show to give much coverage on what is done with the stillage that comes from ethanol production; nor will the academics mention what is done to dispose of *dorna*, the lethal acidic liquid which is the final end result of ethanol production.

Where are the ‘environmental groups’ on all this? They have been enlisted to ‘green-wash’ the ethanol programme. They have posters and placards all around the public areas surrounding sugar cane plantations. With no tree in sight, the placards claim: “Forest is

being preserved” or “Riverside vegetation is being planted.” All that can be seen is cane, cane, cane.

Conservation International is an environmental group engaging in greenwashing. It is difficult to believe the public would support this group if it was known CI lends its name to a sugar mill that evicts fisher folk from a traditional islands’ community; that it encourages the sugar mills to plant non-native trees in an Atlantic Forest area; that it allows the sugar mill to apply agro-chemicals in an area of environmental preservation; that it does not advise the sugar mill on what to do with billions of litres of stillage which the ethanol programme produces. Conservation International does not advise for the simple reason that producing this amount of stillage is unsustainable. So on a dark, moonless night or when there’s a public holiday or long weekend, the stillage is thrown into the river!

CI might say they have encouraged the sugar mill to spray the sugar cane with stillage, ‘ferti-irrigation’ as it is called. But the effect is the same. With the first shower of rain, the stillage, with the surface water, goes into the river. Nor is drying the stillage out – a process called ‘sugar tart’ – and spreading it to the sugar cane fields much different. Similarly, storing the stillage in huge reservoirs can only be bad news for underground water as the liquid remains seep through into the water system.

Then there are sugar mills that change the course of rivers to make fresh water reservoirs which are used to irrigate the sugar cane. The showering waters make small rainbows in the air. They are colourful. One wonders, all the same, how much of this water actually achieves its purpose during the hot, scorching sun, ‘high-noon’ hours. No problem for the sugar mill though, it doesn’t pay for the water, most of which evaporates in the air. Meantime, nearby ‘dormitory towns’ are without water. So the next war will be a water war. It’s already begun.

#### Any advantages to agro-fuels?

The questions continue: “But surely there must be some advantages from bio-combustibles?” It takes a bit of time to learn to say ‘agro-fuels’ or even ‘necro-fuels’ – such is the power of the media in the hands of the sugar-ethanol agri-business to brain-wash the non-attentive observer.

How is it possible to talk of ‘advantages’ when the consequences of this production model are so devastating? Surely, when discussing energy, the first thing to be discussed is our current consumption levels. Cur-

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rently, the planet is expected to produce three times the amount of energy of which it is capable. The number varies. For example: the U.S. consumes five times more than it should. Consumption numbers level out due to the fact sugar cane workers or hinterland dwellers in Africa or Asia consume next to nothing. Even so, they are expected to pay the ecological debt along with everyone else. I believe this is taking 'solidarity' too far!

Consumption levels of the 'developed' north make a mockery of so-called 'solidarity'. The south is referred to as 'under-developed'. I believe 'under-justiced' is a more accurate word. When you are far above your consumption level – with energy or whatever – some find it more convenient to mask matters and talk of under-developed, under-civilized, under-fed, under-educated, under-housed, anything, except under-justiced. So the under-justiced become under-ground. As I move about the Sugar Cane Zone of

Pernambuco, I feel the under-ground being generated, as a direct consequence of Brazil's latifundiary model for sugar cane production will not take long to erupt 'over-ground'. Locally, it already has. The social climate is one of 'low intensity civil war' with casualties rising all the time, possibly rivalling the deaths in Iraq.

The academic road-show will be pushing ethanol. They won't mention another of the 'benefits' from the home-grown energy solution: a home-grown Al Qaida, recruited from the dinginess of 'Slum Planet', while others loll in the luxury of 'clean', 'sustainable' energy, claims that do not stand up to honest scientific investigation. The under-justiced/under-ground are getting ready to come over-ground, to grab a bit of the luxury they themselves created.

### Consumption levels and justice

Which brings us to the next question: What can CPT do to solve or at least soften the disadvantages of this colossal over-consumption of energy that has put Brazil's ethanol production model at centre stage? This question reminds me of the man who had constant, huge headaches. He went to the doctor. A diagnosis was made. Result: tumour on the brain. The doctor counselled the patient to go home, lie down, take plenty of aspirin. This approach by the doctor would, to say the least, be lacking in ethics. Similarly, it would be unethical for CPT to present 'easy solutions' for the energy question. This matter is not so much a problem as a challenge. The challenge is, how, where, who, what, why, when, can the consumption levels on our planet be reduced to sustainable levels?

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For some historic reason to do with colonialism, the First World looks to the Third World. The 'developed' world singles out the 'under-developed', the under-justiced world to produce the materials that will allow the Northern hemisphere to continue consuming at lunatic rates.

What can we do about those who profit from the agro-energy produced from Brazil's sugar cane model? What can you say to the 'Five Sisters' of the petro-energy world who have linked up with the automobile industry and the Brazilian latifundiary model? It's an unholy trinity. The best way to speak with them is through those who consume their products. Show consumers what is at stake when they use ethanol – *full tanks* at the expense of *empty bellies*. Encourage consumers to avoid using a brand name at the pumps. It's not an easy struggle! It's the mosquito against the elephant, but anyone who has tried to

get to sleep at night when there was only one tiny mosquito loose in the room knows the effectiveness of the mosquito!

There is no 'final conclusion' on agroenergy. It obliges us to see the reality of energy with renewed insight each day. We are obliged to hear the voice of the people who are at the receiving end of this 'ethanol boom', to hear the people with new ears. Brazil's working class has been at the receiving end of other economic cycles (timber, coffee, rubber, precious stones, soya). And when 'boom' comes to 'bust', as always happens, it's Brazil's working class which is made to push the bust cycle to the menders. The bosses don't even notice, they are too busy counting their profits. This whole agro-energy question is challenging us about our relationship with Mother Nature. We are so quick to relate to what is presented by the media, slow to wonder aloud: "Is it true?" How slow we are to empathize with Pacha-Mama.

Pacha-Mama is the first written word, the first Bible, the Creator of Heaven and Earth gave us. Let's redouble our efforts to read this First Bible!

Sober thought makes it clear this ethanol boom is creating a holocaust of enormous proportions. Ethanol produced by the Brazilian model is untenable and unacceptable. We need to end the 'ethanol boom'. What we want is Food Sovereignty: a loaded table and a full plate. For this to happen, we need to share the land so we can multiply our daily bread. ■PE

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