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Extraction within the Informal Economy of Haitian Migrants in Guadeloupe

This project sought to better understand the nuances of the informal economy of Haitian immigrants on the French island of Guadeloupe, especially undocumented immigrants, and to explain the role these “black-market” jobs play within the world system. The theoretical basis for this project, as well as many of my already formed connections with undocumented immigrants in Guadeloupe, is thanks to the research and findings from my previous summer’s work on the island through Kellogg’s Experiencing the World Fellowship. My original idea was to find hard numbers on the income, taxed income, job opportunities, and opportunity cost of returning to Haiti for thirty labor immigrants of differing legal status. While I was successful in this regard to a certain extent, I also ran into some challenges I was not expecting which limit my ability to accurately graph immigrants’ economic surplus in Guadeloupe, most specifically related to the difficulty of understanding and estimating the opportunity cost of returning to Haiti. However, that is not to say that I did not come back with hard evidence and numbers that I hope will better our understanding not only of the Haitian immigrant experience in Guadeloupe, but also how immigration policy should be more accurately thought of and what the exact results of criminalizing immigration are.

My research last summer in Guadeloupe (funded by a Kellogg ETW award), built upon the observations of scholars such as Paul Brodwin and Alejandro Portes, used a combination of in-depth interviews with undocumented immigrants and statistics from the French government

itself to show how the legal vulnerability which results from the harsh criminalization of Haitian immigration can be understood as a quantifiable extraction of the income of Haitian labor migrants by the French state. I showed this most clearly through my analysis of the French policy of OQTF's (Obligation de Quitter le Territoire Français). This policy, which is increasingly used in Guadeloupe, refuses an immigrant's application for authorization and gives him or her a set number of days to leave the island before they are stripped of all their rights within the French territory. The result is thousands of immigrant workers who labor in secrecy, without any sort of legal protection or rights. My project last summer also touched upon why these migrants choose to stay in secrecy instead of returning to Haiti, which is the continued employment opportunity in the informal economy. It is this area that this project sought to build upon and better understand. By analyzing quantitatively the income of an immigrant without the right to work and how he or she spends this income, we can paint a picture of how Haitians build surplus through migration, and how much of this surplus is extracted by the French state.

My goal was to gain data on the income and spending of 30 individual immigrants, as well as conduct 10 in-depth interviews to avoid misunderstanding their situation. Fortunately, I was able to build off of the connections I had made last year in Guadeloupe among the Haitian population. In addition, I volunteered with the activist non-profit La Cimade in Guadeloupe, an organization which works to protect the rights of immigrants and give them legal counseling. Because of this fortunate environment I was able to locate and speak with many undocumented immigrants. However, the interview and data collection process still proved quite difficult, and my original goal of collecting complete data on 30 specific individuals too ambitious. The problem I ran into was distrust among those I talked to when I started asking about income. While I was able to speak to even more than 30 individuals, many would grow irritated or simply

refused to talk when asked about their actual employment, income, and expenses. The women I talked with were exceptionally suspicious of me, and I was only able to speak with one female migrant in depth. While the men were more trusting, I still had to form much stronger bonds of friendship and trust than even the previous year for them to share their personal data about their money with me, and for this reason I only reached twenty immigrants overall, seven of which I had already interviewed in the previous year and re-interviewed this year. However, as I use this data for my International Development Studies capstone, I will still be able to use this small sample size to analyze, estimate, and infer truths about the situation of Haitian immigrants working within the Guadeloupian informal economy.

The results were also surprisingly homogenous. Immigrants reported to me time and time again incomes of around 500-800 euros per month, although for some this number could reach towards 1000 euros or even 1200 euros on select months. Most also send back around 200 euros to Haiti each month, despite very different family circumstances within their Haitian families and different income levels, with the rest of the money going mainly to housing and food, although some is saved for consumer items as well, especially nice clothing, smart phones, and tablets. The employment opportunities, at least among men, include primarily construction work, yard work, working in security, and soldering. These “petit jobs,” as the Haitians call them, usually come from individuals, such as homeowners who pay an immigrant to work in their garden for one day or to put down new tiling in their homes. However, there were also unauthorized immigrants who found jobs with specific stores or companies to do consistent work and boost their income by a considerable amount, although these types of jobs are rare since companies are harshly punished under French laws for hiring unauthorized workers. As I mentioned before, what turned out to be most challenging was judging the opportunity cost of staying in Haiti. For

many immigrants I spoke with, Haiti represents no employment, income, or social advancement opportunities at all. A common phrase that I heard many times was that “there was nothing for me in Haiti.” Many claimed that if they were deported back to Haiti, they would simply return to Guadeloupe clandestinely, or try their luck with other islands. Therefore, if I try to model the surplus of immigrating to Guadeloupe, I would have to compare their income in Guadeloupe with their perceived income on other islands, which is much more difficult to accurately understand. While Guadeloupe represents a harsh, unfair, and competitive environment for them, and many of them lamented the French laws and would describe them hatefully and even vulgarly, there is still an awareness of Guadeloupe as a place of opportunity. For younger and more energetic immigrants, Guadeloupe is seen as a place of transition, where they aim to save money in hopes of moving to more accepting (though more expensive) territories, such as mainland France, Canada, or the United States. Many of the younger immigrants seek to increase their social standing by studying multiple languages and self-studying on the side, with the hopes of going to a school in France or the US. Guadeloupe also represents an implicit opportunity for any immigrant who is able to marry a French Guadeloupian and have children, which could open up the means for them to get authorization to work, as well as raise a child who has a right to a free and public education. One immigrant I spoke with was undergoing a personal crisis in this regard, as he was considering hiring a French Guadeloupian woman to marry him so he could obtain work authorization. Surprisingly, however, this action was strongly condemned by many in his church and community, and he himself appeared very conflicted about the action. Before I left Guadeloupe he had terminated the engagement, and continues to work in the underground.

Because I reconnected with many of the friends I made the first summer in Guadeloupe, I became very close to one particular group of my research subjects who lived together. In one

respect, this was necessary to build the friendship and trust required to interview them and understand their lives. However, after spending four months talking, going to church, going to the beach, and dining with them, these interviews became much more emotionally difficult. I was struck by the energy and hard work of my young friends who woke up every morning at four o'clock to find physical labor, while they would also study and practice foreign languages such as English and Spanish during the nights with the hopes of becoming citizens and going back to school. I understood much clearer this summer the frustration and anguish they felt in their lives. Many had tried living in Haiti, St. Martin, the Dominican Republic, and Dominica before, and found either unsatisfactory opportunities or were physically deported from these islands. There was a sense of not quite despair, but acceptance, that they would most likely be deported from Guadeloupe eventually. This feeling was mixed with a sort of restrained hope that maybe this time things would work out. Thanks to my job with La Cimade and what I learned there about the legal applications to get a residency permit, I was able to help some of them with their own applications and give some legal advice. However, this also led to the misunderstanding that I somehow worked for the government, and I had to disappoint many of them when I explained that I was in no way able to influence the state when it made its decisions. I saw three grown men cry when talking about their frustration with finding a means to live, and I had to cope with strong feelings of powerlessness to change what I and all my Guadeloupian friends found as a grave injustice.

Overall, I am extremely thankful that so many hardworking and courageous people trusted me enough to share their stories and histories with me, despite the great risk that the information posed to them. While I cannot change the laws throughout the Caribbean, I will do

what I can with their stories to illustrate clearly the injustices they face. Finally, I cannot wait to go back to Guadeloupe to see all my friends there again, in person.