



Health at the Margins: Paul Farmer, Haiti, and the Transnationally Disciplined Body

Patrick M. Kinley

Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa USA
kinleypa@grinnell.edu

In his poem “The Nobodies,” Eduardo Galeano writes, “The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way...The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them” (as cited in Farmer, 2005, p. 1). This epigraph highlights Paul Farmer’s concern with the marginal communities with which he works in Haiti. As a medical doctor, he has worked for years to fight health inequality and to significantly improve health outcomes. This work has resulted in ethnographic data that he uses as an anthropologist to construct a picture of structural violence and transnational inequality around the globe. He argues that this violence and inequality constitute violations of the fundamental human right to health. This paper aims to reexamine Farmer’s ethnographic data through Das and Poole’s (2004) anthropological theory of the margins and the state. It will show that the disciplining of Haiti as a geopolitical margin at a macro level caused violence, which is further inscribed upon the individual bodies of those who live at the margins in Haiti. This paper will demonstrate how violence and the factors that cause it can be tracked from the macro, even transnational, scale down to the very human bodies it affects in local communities.

I. Haiti and its Margins

Haiti occupies the margins of the transnational political economy in a number of important ways. Here, margins signify what Das and Poole (2004) describe as those areas “that so often constitute the terrain of ethnographic fieldwork [which] are seen as sites of disorder, where the state has been unable to impose order” (p. 6). In other words, the margins as described by Das and Poole and as used in this paper are often those states or sectors of a state that are perceived as disordered and unmanageable in some way. Das and Poole (2004) characterize the perception of the human occupants of these margins as “unruly subjects” (p. 9).

Haiti’s history of political instability places it firmly on the transnational political margin. Before the 1915 US invasion of Haiti, the “political situation there was often anarchical. Mintz notes that ‘of Haiti’s twenty-four chief executives between 1907 and 1915, only eight were in office for a period equal to their elected terms, and seventeen were deposed by revolution’” (Farmer, 1992, p. 178). Mintz demonstrates how Haiti was considered disordered, unruly, and even “anarchic” (Farmer, 1992, p. 178). This perception is especially important when contrasted against the relative political stability of its neighbor, the United States, which has successfully elected 44 chief executives in the span of almost 250 years. In this political scene, the Haitian people could be perceived as what Das and Poole call “unruly subjects” because of their seemingly continual revolution that perennially leads to more unrest.

In addition to a history of political instability, Haiti has more recently found itself on the economic margins of the Western Hemisphere. After all, Haiti had “a per capita annual income of \$315 in 1983” (Farmer, 1992, p. 183). This places Haiti in stark contrast with the US’ relative economic prosperity. Haitian poverty is also something of which Americans have traditionally taken advantage. Farmer cites a troubling American viewpoint from the middle to late twentieth century:

“I honestly believe,” said Stanley Urban, president of the Haitian-American Chamber of Commerce and Industry, “that a dictatorship is the best form of government for these people [the Haitians]. There are six million illiterates on that island.

Think of what the Ruskies could do there.” He said, “There’s more democracy for business in Haiti than for business in the United States.” In Haiti labor was cheap and disciplined at a minimum daily wage of \$2.64. “In other words,” he exclaimed, “the whole country is virtually a free trade zone!” (Farmer, 1992, p. 187)

This disturbing perspective demonstrates Haiti’s marginality in the transnational economic system that includes the United States and its backdoor. “‘Margins’ signifies ‘border,’ and to be ‘marginal’ means to be somewhere outside the centre, at the edge... ‘marginal people’ are those deemed to be of less importance to the mainstream” (Das and Poole, 2004, p. 19). Haiti, in this example, was at the edge of the transnational economic system because the United States was the economic powerhouse of the region. Thus, Haiti occupied part of the periphery because of its extreme poverty. After all, there is a reason why it is called the *backdoor*. Moreover, Haitians became “marginal people” because their economic status (earning more than \$2.64 per day) was “deemed of less importance” than the “free trade zone” that Haiti provided to the United States. While the United States inhabits the center, Haiti occupies the margins of a transnational political economy because of its political instability and economic disadvantage.

II. Disciplining the Haitian Margin

The anthropological theory surrounding the state and its margins, as outlined by Das and Poole, shows that the state must discipline its margins, and that margins, such as Haiti, can be disciplined in a number of ways. Das and Poole (2004) point out the “order-making functions” of the state (p. 6). They conclude that it is the state’s role to correct or “discipline” the uncertainty and disorder that often demarcate the margins from the rest of society: “As ethnographers, we were interested in understanding the specific technologies of power through which states attempt to ‘manage’ or ‘pacify’ these populations through both force and a pedagogy of coercion intended to transform ‘unruly subjects’” (Das and Poole, 2004, p. 9). Das and Poole emphasize the state’s role in disciplining “unruly subjects.” However, they add that discipline is conducted through specific “technologies of power.” Michel

Foucault (2007), a philosopher and social theorist that Das and Poole echo in their work, complicates this notion, as discipline can “comprise a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets” (p. 464). Thus, discipline can come in many institutionalized forms.

Indeed, Haiti was disciplined as a transnational margin through “development” projects, such as the construction of dams. Farmer’s original research site and continued medical practice is located in Do Kay, a small village near Mirebalais, Haiti. In 1956, the Artibonite River and its tributaries were dammed, flooding the valley in which Do Kay’s predecessor, Kay, was situated. The dam produced hundreds of “water refugees” who could no longer farm the fertile land surrounding the Artibonite River. Its building was orchestrated by The Organisme de Développement de la Vallée de l’Artibonite (ODVA). Note the creole cognate of “development” in the name. The ODVA “was born of an agreement, signed in Washington, D.C., in 1949, between the Haitian government and the Export-Import Bank” (Farmer, 1992, p. 22). The Export-Import Bank of the United States is America’s export credit agency. The origins and finances of the program clearly demonstrate the link between the center (Washington, D.C.) and “development.”

The dam was built by an organization founded on “development,” but what need to be “developed?” One of Farmer’s informants recounts why the dam was built: “Well, it was in order to light up Port-au-Prince with electricity, but I get nothing out of that. Port-au-Prince has light, but I’m in darkness—and I live right next door to Peligre! It’s the big shots in Port-au-Prince who are having fun now” (Farmer, 1992, p. 27). It was the capital of Haiti that needed electricity. This demonstrates an underlying comparison with the United States. Every city in America has electricity, setting the standard of proper “development.” Thus, developing countries like Haiti that occupy the margins of the transnational political economy need to meet the standard. Indeed, building a hydroelectric dam could be considered a “technology of power” by which the center maintains and disciplines the margins. Additionally, this informant’s account reveals the importance of the margins in the decision to build the dam. While Port-au-Prince (a center within the state of Haiti) would be lit, the rural areas (the periphery) would remain in darkness. In this case, Haiti is disciplined as a

transnational margin through the building of the dam. Simultaneously, however, a marginalized population within Haiti, the countryside, is displaced, demonstrating how the margins are often “of less importance than the mainstream.”

III. The Invisible Violence of Marginality and Discipline

The anthropology of the margins of the state provides more useful theoretical perspectives by showing that the transnational disciplining of the Haitian margin through “development” results in violence. Utilizing the theory of Max Weber, Das and Poole (2004) conclude that because the margins must be disciplined to maintain order, they necessarily entail and are even constituted by violence. They write, “[A]dministrative staff [of the state] successfully uphold the claim to the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of physical force in the enforcement of its order” (p. 7). Physical force in this case can be interpreted as physical violence. Thus, the state holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence to maintain order, or squelch disorder, which is most often found at the margins. Most often, then, legitimate state violence occurs at its margins.

Marginality manifests in two distinct but important forms of violence. First, marginality appears in often-invisible structural violence. It is hidden from the unknowing observer because it becomes evident only in an individual or community’s increased probability of suffering or dying from disease. Nguyen and Pschard (2003) write, “Risk, then, can be said to be a measure of social violence, capturing how power distributes unevenly down the social ladder” (p. 457). That it, risk, or increased probability of catching, suffering, and dying from disease, constitutes violence. Farmer would not disagree with this analysis. He discusses structural violence at length, arguing that it is a result of entrenched inequality that “is ‘structured’ by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces...to constrain agency” (Farmer, 2003, p. 40). These processes have a “markedly patterned occurrence...that increase the likelihood that one will become infected” with disease (Farmer, 1999, p. 13). This speaks to Farmer’s understanding of structural violence, which includes historical and economic factors. However, he does not explicitly link these factors to marginality. In his opinion, violence is structured along “axes of

oppression,” like race, sex, economic status, and political freedom. These axes represent some of the types of marginality discussed in this paper. Farmer (2003) adds, “We [can] devise an analytic model, one with explanatory and predictive power, for understanding suffering in global context” (p. 42). Here, Farmer’s aspiration to “predictive power” demonstrates his understanding of structural violence to be founded on the analysis of risk, for it is impossible to predict exactly who will become sick but less difficult to predict who has a higher probability of becoming ill. While Farmer’s understanding of violence emphasizes the role of structural violence, his work entails the very physical and, therefore, visible violence that is a necessary entailment of discipline at the transnational level.

IV. Marginal Bodies, Visible Violence

Margins are iterative, and Haiti’s marginality at the macro level produces, or makes possible, additional marginality at the micro level in a recursive fashion. The community Farmer studies in Do Kay finds itself at the periphery in a number of ways, which is illustrated through the story of Acéphie Joseph, one of the first people in the region to be infected and to die of AIDS. She was a woman from Do Kay whose family members were “water refugees” as a result of the same dam project that disciplined Haiti as a transnational margin. Before the dam, her family made a living by farming the productive land surrounding the Artibonite River, their “ancestor’s gardens” (Farmer, 2003, p. 32). Additionally, they had to move their original hut because it “was too near the water...I was afraid one of the children would fall into the lake and drown” (Farmer, 2003, p. 33). As a result, dire poverty befell Acéphie’s family, causing, “gnawing hunger” (Farmer, 2003, p. 34). The marginality that Acéphie’s family faces stacks at every level. The margins are productive, as the existence of one margin makes possible the existence of the next at a different level. First, Haiti, which occupied the margin of the transnational political economy, was disciplined through the dam project. This project, now evident through Farmer’s ethnographic data of Do Kay, specifically disciplined the periphery within Haiti, the countryside in which Acéphie’s family lived. This process is iterative because only through these two previous levels of marginality and the respective disciplining of them, does a new margin form. After the

building of the dam and the loss of their subsistence, Acépchie and her family now occupy a new margin as the poor and hungry of Haiti.

Similarly, within the same organizational level, margins intersect. That is to say, the unfortunate results of the iterative marginality caused by the dam were not the only factors negatively affecting Acépchie and her family. Their community was on the biomedical, geographic, and economic margins already existing in Haiti. For example, there are 18 physicians per every 100,000 inhabitants in Haiti, compared to 364 physicians per 100,000 people in the United States (Farmer 1999, p. 19). There are simply not enough doctors to treat sick patients. Haiti lies on the biomedical margins because the center, the United States, is the main source of biomedicine worldwide, the source of newest protease inhibitors and antibiotics, while Haiti does not even have enough doctors to administer them. Furthermore, the rurality of Do Kay and the surrounding area, a form of geographic marginality, further contributes to the position of Do Kay's residents on the absolutely dire margins of the transnational political economy. According to Farmer, "An officially reported per capita annual income of \$315 in 1983 misrepresented the situation in the countryside, where it hovered around \$50" (Farmer, 1992, p. 6). In addition to the economic hardships caused by the dam, Acépchie's family was already at risk of extreme poverty because of their geographic position; they were on the margins because they lived outside of Port-au-Prince. Acépchie found herself at the regrettable intersection of these margins.

The combination of convergent and iterative marginality causes violence in a second, more physical and, therefore more visible, way, as it is inscribed upon the sick bodies, like Acépchie's, that live on the margins. Anthropologists have conceived of the body to be a unique entity on which the results of inequality become clear: "If we look at the body not only as a biological entity but also as a social product, it becomes clear how the body is the place where power relations are played out" (Polit, 2005, p. 226). Indeed, the "social product" of violence was especially evident on Acépchie's body, as she contracted, suffered, and died from AIDS. Acépchie began helping her mother carry the little produce they grew to the markets every Friday morning. The young and attractive Acépchie caught the eye of a soldier named Honorat who was stationed at an army barracks along the journey to the market. Farmer

explains the context of their unfortunate and over determined interaction:

Such flirtation is seldom rejected, at least openly. In rural Haiti, entrenched poverty made the soldiers—the region’s only salaried men—ever so much more attractive. Hunger was a near-daily occurrence for the Joseph family; the times were as bad as those right after the flooding of the valley. And so when Acéphie’s good looks caught the eye of Captain Jacques Honorat...she returned his gaze. (Farmer, 2003, p. 33)

While Acéphie and Honorat were sexual partners for only a month, she contracted HIV as a result of their relations. Acéphie’s contraction of HIV demonstrates violence because at the time, no one in Do Kay was infected with the virus. Only as a result of her family’s poverty and desperation was she brought into contact with Honorat, positioned to accept his interest, and exposed to his illness. A young girl of her status would have had no little choice but to accept a soldier’s advances given the economic condition of Haiti’s rural countryside. Acéphie’s HIV infection only developed into AIDS years later, after Acéphie had worked in Port-au-Prince as maid, married another man, and given birth to her first child. It is through this terrible infection that the violence, which necessarily resulted from the marginality of Acéphie and her community, was inscribed upon her body. She was a tall, strong, and attractive young woman. After her infection, though, she was afflicted with “drenching night sweats and debilitating diarrhea.” She was overtaken by “a persistent lassitude” and became “more and more gaunt.” She died quickly as a result of inadequate care, for “political violence hampered her doctors’ ability to open the clinic” (Farmer, 2003, p. 35). It is through this physical suffering of illness and disease that violence is inscribed upon the body. It is through seeing the sores of infection, hearing the coughs of tuberculosis, and witnessing Acéphie’s gaunt face that the physical violence inscribed upon the bodies at the margins is made visible to the ethnographer.

The inscription of violence on individual bodies can be traced to its roots at the macro level. The building of the dam, a form of disciplining Haiti as a margin, combined with both iterative and

intersecting marginality in Haiti's countryside, resulted in violence that was physically inscribed upon Acéphie's body. Anthropology, as a discipline, can be useful in performing the type of analysis outlined here. In her ethnography, *Death Without Weeping*, Scheper-Hughes (1994) similarly examines health inequality and practices what she calls an "anthropology-with-one's-feet-on-the-ground" (p. 4). She divided her time, "not always equally, between fieldwork and community work" while studying death and inequality in rural Brazil (Scheper-Hughes, 1994, p. 18). Farmer has adopted a strikingly similar method, as he writes, "Although I initially worked as a community health worker...in recent years most of my time has been consumed in direct clinical care" (Farmer, 1999, p.25). The commonalities in method utilized by Farmer and Scheper-Hughes suggest an effective, possibly ideal model of studying inequality: with one foot in theoretical research and the other in practical contributions to the communities the researcher studies. In this sense, anthropology can be a means of witnessing inequality while simultaneously taking steps to ameliorate it. It is through the use of this model that the suffering of 'the nobodies' and "the nobodied," like Acéphie's, can be both identified and relieved.

References

Das, V. & Poole, D. (2004). State and Its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies In V. Das & D. Poole (Eds.), *Anthropology of the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Farmer, P. (1992). *Aids and Accusations: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Farmer, P. (2003). *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Foucault, M. (2007). Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison In B. Lawrence & A. Karim (Eds.), *On Violence*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Nguyen, V-K. & Peschard, D. (2003). Anthropology, Inequality, and Disease: A Review. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 32, 447-474.

Polit, K. M. (2005). The Effects of Inequality and Relative Marginality on the Well-being of Low Caste People in Central Uttaranchal. *Anthropology and Medicine*, 12, 225-237.

Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992). *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.