

Anthropology of Structural Silence

*Making explicit neocolonialist methods of silencing the poor
and misrepresented*

BRENDAN BLOWERS

Final Exam Report

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Introduction

The notion of “structural violence” has been used by medical anthropologist Paul Farmer to account for the disproportionately high levels of risk for infectious disease that afflict patients he has worked with in areas of extreme poverty, particularly in the country of Haiti. He defines structural violence as “violence exerted systematically – that is, indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order” (Farmer 2004:307). Because this type of oppression is enacted “indirectly,” as part of large-scale social and economic structures, modern anthropology has theories that help frame and describe the nebulous mystique of how “structural violence” works.

Farmer describes “erasing history [as] perhaps the most common explanatory sleight-of-hand relied upon by the architects of structural violence” (2004:308). Several authors have described the erasure of Haiti’s history and attributed it to various conscious efforts by those who hold power in the political economy, such as a deliberate silence by slave-owning nations who feared the ramifications in their own plantations (Shilliam 2008:793). Along with several explanations of how political economy exposes the marginalization of countries like Haiti, there are other critiques that question the development model and its use of neocolonialist techniques to impose (failed) attempts at “nation building.” These intervention strategies have created regimes of representation and hegemonies of discourse that once again result in the silencing of Haitian voices.

Along with structural violence, then, which is inscribed on the bodies of those suffering the effects of living on the periphery of the world capitalist system, is a “structural silence” which renders their plight invisible by the erasure of history, exclusion

from global discourse, spatial and technological isolation, ruptured channels of communication and social networks, and dominant narratives and regimes of representation about Haitians themselves, to which they cannot contribute.

The structural silencing of Haiti will be described and exposed, through a review of the various ways it has been identified in scholarly works. From the many attempts made to address issues of inequality and extreme suffering in Haiti, a few emerging methodologies will be examined through accounts of their implementation, in order to highlight and suggest a movement toward a “non-imperialist” praxis that reverses the trend of structural silence.

Overtures of Silence, Part 1 – The Structural Silencing of the Past

Elizabeth Jelin notes that “forgetting is no absence or lack. It is the presence of an absence” (Sandoval 2009:165). That is to say, there is no lack of a narrative of Haitian history, but rather the presence of a neo-Weberian “grand narrative” of modernization from a European perspective that effectively replaces and silences Haiti’s fight for independence (Shilliam 2008:785). Even if one recognizes the Haitian revolution as a Hegelian “antithesis” to the thesis of slavery, striving in the direction of freedom, it remains an anomaly – an isolated slave rebellion – that never fully became its own “thesis” in the realm of global politics. Part of this was a conscious effort on the part of other slaveholding nations in order to protect the stability of their own abducted workforce (Farmer 2004:312, Shilliam 2008:793). European and American authors described the “catastrophic Haitian reality” in order to “[justify] the political and cultural domination of the West” (Vonarx 2007:25). In the West’s writing of Haitian reality, Haiti

“exemplified failed independence and was portrayed as a hotbed of magic and witchcraft” (Vonarx 2007:25). Not surprisingly, this narrative “did great symbolic violence” and as such “was an effective tool for legitimising colonialism” (Vonarx 2007:25).

This “structural silence” of Haiti’s significant role in the history of the West is not the case within Haiti (Farmer 2004:311), where this history of wrongs is woven into perspectives on health, religion, and concepts of justice. The “folk religions” of the Caribbean are concerned with a “practical justice,” one that assures people that “however harsh life might seem and whatever threats or dangers might lurk on either the natural or supernatural planes, there is fairness in the world” (Singer 1985:297). Singer (1985:298) suggests that this concept of “practical justice” works itself out on a global scale, being ultimately concerned that a long history of wrongs – including foreign conquest, slavery, racism, introduced disease, colonial domination, poverty, and subordination into the periphery of the world capitalist system – be righted and that these violations be punished.

Overtures of Silence, Part II – the Structural Silencing of the Present

Contemporary methods to silence the poor are similar, but take on a different form. The skewed perception that results from misrepresentation is fueled by several factors. Firstly, the tools of representation, be those technologies or knowledge systems or symbolic capital, are often beyond the reach of the poor. Secondly, regimes of discourse and representation function in a neocolonial way by only allowing narrowly defined modes of representation by the poor, using standards and values that they

themselves have not created. Attempts to represent oneself in any way not sanctioned by Western hegemony need not be disproved; it is automatically disqualified and not even entered into the discourse. Thirdly, the wielding of “development” and “national security” tropes in political economy strategically serves the interests of industrialized nations over countries like Haiti. And finally, macroapproaches to issues of political economy and globalization shift focus from the subjective experience of Haitians and tend to become obsessively preoccupied with world systems and historical blame. In a sense, this last factor is a critique of the previously discussed silencing of history.

Firstly, the tools of “representation” are often beyond the reach of the poor. Ideas about a “flat world” and the use of technology to level the playing field are highly debatable, especially considering the nature of computerized information systems. Computers are used most effectively to organize and compute information, information that is quickly reaching levels largely irrelevant to the needs of the rural poor. Computer systems are also built for use in climate-controlled environments that are beyond the resources and infrastructure of the poor to create. Cool, dry, clean, protected rooms, are opposite to the climate of the majority-world tropical realm where most of the world’s poor live. And finally, Internet connectivity is either unavailable or cost-prohibited in isolated parts of the world.

Even where technology *is* available to the poor, they would be required to represent their needs on the terms of the Western hegemonic discourse with which they may or may not be familiar. One of the principal ways of understanding the plight of third-world countries is through the development apparatus, which is problematic:

Development has relied exclusively on one knowledge system, namely, the modern Western one. The dominance of this knowledge system has dictated the marginalization and disqualification of non-Western knowledge systems.

[Escobar 1995:13]

This forces people in a country like Haiti, with an illiteracy rate of as high as 70 percent, to rely on and sometimes pay local “trauma brokers” to reframe their expressed needs in way that development agencies can replicate and use (James 2004:140). Interestingly, this also gave political leaders Aristide and Latortue a way to pass information transnationally and bolster support from Haitian diaspora living in the United States to support their political agendas (Laguerre 2005).

Not only do Haitians have limited access to the tools and knowledge systems necessary to make their voices heard, but they are also given narrowly defined limits within which their stories can be told. This trend operates in a way that “has routinized or professionalized forms of response or intervention that targets the suffering of victims and transforms their experiences, identity, and ‘political subjectivity’” (James 2004:131). This develops what Erica James (2004:131) termed “*occult economies* of trauma that generate new forms of victimization and reproduce sociopolitical inequalities at local, national, and international levels of engagement.” She goes on to describe how “trauma portfolios” are developed in order to procure the attention and help of development organizations. A similar case is described by Mark Schuller where a Haitian man attempting to fulfill all the complex requirements to obtain funding from USAID for a grassroots community project. The project ends up as one of Haiti’s many NGO failures, or as Schuller (2007:68) argues, projects that “*have been* failed by the same neoliberal

policies and institutions that are ostensibly working toward their participation and empowerment.”

This creates problems for academic inquiry as well, particularly for anthropologists who sometimes play the role of “mediating” the ethnographically visible and fitting it into the constructs of the scholastic perspective. Pierre Bourdieu described “scientific rationalism” as “both the expression and the justification of a Western arrogance” (Farmer 2004:313), making it problematic as a vehicle for making sense of Third World realities that may be ethnographically observed on other terms. Anthropologists doing fieldwork in areas wrought with violence and terror have found it necessary to suggest radically revised field strategies and research techniques, such as the ones Kovats-Bernat (2002) suggests based on his work in a Haitian slum. In such settings, “the customary approaches, methods, and ethics of anthropological fieldwork are at times insufficient, irrelevant, inapplicable, imprudent, or simply naïve” (Kovats-Bernat 2002:208-209).

The resulting problem is that representations of issues in Haiti remain mostly in the hands of outsiders. Media coverage tends to be very selective in the topics it covers in poor and marginalized areas. “Richly socialized accounts take time and space,” and “are rare in the media that command popular attention” (Farmer 2004:309). This is the case not only for Haiti but for other misrepresented victims of political economy as well. Victims of urban segregation living in the isolated barrio of La Carpio in Costa Rica’s capitol are represented by the media “as violent, dark skinned and uneducated,” a representation which is “often seen as a ‘threat’ to Costa Rican’s’ national identity as white, peaceful, and educated citizens” (Sandoval 2009:156). La Carpio, where “the

media provides most of the available narratives” (Sandoval 2009:166), only receives attention from the media “when an irregularity has taken place” (Sandoval 2009:161).

The contemporary reality of marginalized nations is silenced in part by neocolonial strategies in political economy. Neocolonialist foreign policies have created “representations of the Third World through development [that] are no less pervasive and effective than their colonial counterparts” (Escobar 1995:15). All representations are pressured by normative forces toward a singular, dominant history of ideas that has been imagined and legitimized through the use of military force and discursive power. The trajectory of exploitation has progressed through slavery, to colonialism, to Eric Wolf’s (1982) “new laborers,” and arrived at development and modernization. Part of this can be understood ethnographically through studying Haitian emigration. It is believed that “some 500,000 to 800,000 Haitian nationals live in the DR, equivalent to almost 10 percent of Haiti’s population” (Martin et al. 2002:571). Haitian emigration due to repressive regimes and extreme poverty has always been a key issue that drives U.S. national interests in Haiti, especially between 1991 and 1994 when heightened media coverage shed light on the Haitian plight. Haitian boat refugees fleeing to the United States were granted asylum if it could be proven they were fleeing for political unrest (not “just” to escape poverty). Contemporary discussions of modernization and neoliberalism often fail to recognize that

People are becoming one of the primary products of export in the Central American region.... Much of contemporary rhetoric (and also critique) about free trade ignores that the moving people around, often against their will, is one of the principle forms of “globalization” and income as much in Central America as in

other regions, including independently of treaties and agreements that can or cannot be signed. [Sandoval 2005:6]

The effects of inequalities that are “embodied” in bad health outcomes (Farmer 2004:315), stigmatization, and migration should be seriously considered along with the potential benefits that globalism offers.

Many of the different silencing techniques discussed up to this point draw heavily from theories of political economy, historical-structural critique, and a world systems approach. However, these perspectives exclude the experiences of the poor in their own way as well. The unit of analysis in these theories is not individuals but macrosystems of capitalism and the global market, relegating most human actors to roles as “passive reactors manipulated by the world capitalist system” (Brettel 2000:104). In the case of Haiti, Haitians are staged as hopeless victims in the machinery of the world capitalist system and the sleight-of-hand deceptiveness of political economy. The historical-structural representations in particular emphasize the distress, suffering, and victimization of the Haitian people. While this is helpful in explaining historical reasons for present contexts of poverty and oppression, it is largely silent on the role of human agents, particularly those in disadvantaged positions, of reconciling these inequalities and reversing the injustices set in motion by the past. Few of these theories, and even fewer development models, offer ways to legitimize and empower the “periphery” as critical agents in overcoming the challenges they face.

Rising Crescendo of Murmuring Voices – Hope for the future through emic methodologies

Political economy theory, medical anthropology, development and modernization theory, and the study of Caribbean folk religions are all important fields of study that should be in the toolkit of any anthropologist or practitioner working in Haiti.

Community-centered practice, collective action, indigenization, and transnational communities will be highlighted as ways that practitioners and Haitians have found to reverse the effect of structural silence.

Community-centered practice (CCP) stems from the idea that anthropologists can position themselves as advocates in the societies they study. It is an attempt to create a “non-imperialist praxis” that “uses its skills and resources to foster indigenous initiatives and self-representations” (Singer 1994:336). Emic anthropological methodologies combine what the anthropologist brings with the voices and values of the local community. As for the anthropologist, this choosing of an advocacy position presents certain compromises for the “scientific validity” of their research, but it also allows the anthropologist to play a reciprocal role in the research process. The research is practical and beneficial to the local community as well as the broader anthropological discipline. CCP sets up “an ongoing conversation between activist community members... and anthropologists with a long-term commitment to local community collaboration” (Singer 1994:341). CCP assumes that the anthropologist is equipped with practical skills and services that are of interest to the community, some of those being formal research methods, mediation, and community mobilization. It also assumes that the local

community agrees on a few key trajectories and wishes to organize their efforts toward accomplishing those goals.

Community-centered practice helps position the role of the anthropologist, but the study of community organization and mobilization dynamics is described as “collective action.” Despite the fact that many people believe “Haiti presents some of the most difficult conditions for both cooperation and conversation in the developing world” (White and Runge 1995:1684), collective action still emerges given the proper circumstances. White and Runge (1995:1685) describe the challenges faced by bolstering community responsibility for watershed management in Haiti. They identify three distinct phases in the social phenomenon of collective action: (1) the status quo is challenged and a community response is proposed, (2) individual agents choose whether or not to participate in the proposed response, and (3) collective action evolves based on what individuals choose. Watershed management is a perfect context for studying this process, as each peasant’s situation is affected by what other farmers upstream choose to do, and the consequences of upstream decisions are magnified as one moves downstream. The study uncovered a few interesting factors. First, the “tragedy of the commons” scenario did not occur. White and Runge (1995:1691-1692) found that “the poorest of all social categories – the nonwatershed landholders – provided over one-third of all labor for watershed management.” They believe this is part of an economy of favors where the poorer peasants used the “strategic building of obligations [as] a response to poverty and a strategy for survival” (White and Runge 1995:1692). Another finding revealed that “collective action groups will emerge where a critical mass of individuals have practical

knowledge of the potential gains” (White and Runge 1995:1694). These findings, along with others, help explain what conditions give rise to successful collective action.

Indigenization is “the process of transformation that often occurs when social institutions developed in one social context are transplanted into a totally different social context” (Coreil and Mayard 2006:128). One example is an illness support group model that was transposed into Haitian culture for women suffering from *lymphatic filariasis* (elephantiasis). Since “there existed no indigenous model for the peer support group” (Coreil and Mayard 2006:131), the model was adapted by the support group itself to take on a “culturally meaningful, distinctly Haitian meeting format” (Coreil and Mayard 2006:132). For example, the sharing of food, prayer and singing, and practical skill classes were requested and gradually became a part of the meetings. This new format was initiated by the women, who “were less interested in sharing personal illness stories than is typical in North American and European support groups” (Coreil and Mayard 2006:133). Using this approach, focus group members chose the format and agenda for the meetings.

Creating “transnational” communities is a common way diaspora maintain connections with friends and family in their home country. In a case described by Karen Richman and Terry Ray (2009:150), audiocassettes are used to record religious ceremonies in Haitian Creole and are then passed back and forth between congregations in the U.S. and in Haiti:

For poor Haitians, whose social, economic, cultural, and political subjugation has long been reproduced by illiteracy in the colonial language of domination, corresponding in Creole on audiocassettes is an effective means of circumventing

scriptural French, of cementing transnational ties, and of producing and accumulating social, cultural, political, and religious capital.

Audio recordings (and more recently, video recordings) create the cohesive/reproductive force that forms communal solidarity, which Durkheim considered religion's primary function (Richman and Ray 2009:150). Religious ceremonies recorded on cassette strengthen not only these transnational ties, but also provide a way for Haitian peasants to capture the oral culture of Haitian Creole and religious ceremonies, one that cannot be properly reproduced in written form. The possibilities this offers extend beyond religion and even into politics, as was mentioned earlier regarding transnational bolstering of political support. While Aristide was a priest before entering the political arena, he was already known in Miami through sermons that had been recorded and passed across the ocean (Richman and Ray 2009:158).

Conclusion

As has been shown, structural silence is a natural complement to structural violence and other forms of oppression. However, it can be contended on several levels, ironically using some of the same tools and methods that are used to engineer it. And conceivably, if structural violence and silence are at all linked, it is possible that some of the strategies that give voice and legitimize the knowledge systems of the poor can be used to mitigate structural violence... *nonviolently*. Examining lessons learned from the country of Haiti provide alternative ways of speaking the past, speaking the present, and speaking hope for the future.

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