

Cerca la Source: Let Poverty Flow Down Like Water

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Our road is a river of donkey shit. OK, it is a bit of an exaggeration to say it's a river, but the shit is real. This is my first trip to Cerca la Source. Our four wheel drive truck bounces, crawling slowly through the water and mud and dung. Night is falling; a creeping rain is closing in with the darkness. Beside the few people still walking the road at this hour, nearly all in bare feet, most of the traffic on this rural dirt path is on four legs. Donkeys, horses, goats, cows. We did pass one car on the three hour drive. It was stuck in the mud, showing us, by their spinning wheels and the mud-covered gang of people pushing, a better route to take through an adjacent field.

The humid air is unusually cool for September in Haiti, so we are traveling with the windows open. The constant smell of wet feces travels with us, never overwhelming but never clearing either. As the rain approaches, short gusts of wind blow in cleaner air, only to be replaced by the hanging stench of the road. The smell of animals is universal in rural, poor communities but this road seems special. We wade through puddle after puddle. Such a quaint word, puddle. It evokes (for readers the rich world) childhood, spring rains, and splashing around in oversized rubber boots. These are not exactly puddles. The muddy brown brack water flows over the hood in the deepest of these pits. Rocks and thick mud scrape the bottom of our truck. Any of these muddy spots – which make up about half of the 'road' are large enough to bog us down indefinitely. Sometimes our team of nurses and doctors, pharmacists and midwives, sleeps on the road, waiting for morning and the drying sun to help them get unstuck.

And I haven't even mentioned the stream crossings. As we left the relative metropolis of Hinche behind us, I asked our driver how many streams we would cross. He didn't know – despite an intimate and expert knowledge of each mud hole on the road. He preferred not to remember. All stream crossings are the same. There are no bridges anymore – the last was before Hinche. Any stream can swell, anytime, cutting the road, depending only on the rains further up in the mountains. At several, the driver says matter-of-factly, “we spent the night here waiting for the water to come down.”

At the end of this road is the town of Cerca la Source, a rural village and the site of our newest clinic. In town, the muddy road flattens out and is baked to a cracked, brown crust interrupted only by rivulets cut by the daily rains running through town. Dusty houses surround the road, the Catholic church, and our little “dispensary,” or rural health post. As I arrive, the hulking shadow of what will be a new hospital hangs over the dispensary. Rows of hand-poured cinder blocks fill the courtyard. It's as much construction site as clinic. Progress is easy to feel here. Despite the late hour, I tour the clinic with the justifiably-proud staff. Two patients are lying in despite the fact that we have no beds. One with fever and dehydration; the other still bleeding after losing a pregnancy in her 2nd month. She

needs an obstetrician but cannot see one until we can evacuate her. For now, she is stable with antibiotics and IV fluids. Tomorrow, if the rains allow, we will take her back down the same miserable road.

The name Cerca la Source is a mix of Spanish and French, meaning “Near the Spring.” I have not been here long enough to know where the spring is – or if there is even just one. And while this place is visibly in extreme poverty – seen in the swollen bellies and yellow hair of its starving children, the gaunt, creased faces of young and old alike, the rags-for-clothing and bare feet – it has some water, some trees. But if Cerca is any less poor than some of her neighbors, it’s by a hair’s breadth.

From this description, it may seem that a place like Cerca la Source is one ‘source’ of the grinding poverty that affects a majority of the world’s population. People from Cerca la Source and thousands of villages like it – in Haiti, Mexico, Ecuador, India, China, Tanzania, etc – are streaming to the mega-slums that now hold nearly a billion poor people world wide. A recent article estimates that the worldwide movement of people from rural into urban poverty is happening at a rate of 200,000 people per day.¹ For example, it is estimated that 2/3 of the 10-15 million citizens of Lagos, Nigeria are poor people living in slums. But this is not the well-spring of poverty; it is a down stream effect.

If we push the analogy of rainwater representing poverty a bit further, then global consumption is the source, the continuous cloudburst of poverty. And inequality is the eroding slope causing a runoff, a flash flood pushing the poor – muddied and battered if not dead and drowned – into even deeper poverty downstream.

This is how consumption struck Venezuela’s president Hugo Chavez on his first visit to the United States in September, 2005. In his first interview in the US, on the independent news program DemocracyNow, Chavez had this to say:

“5 percent of the world population lives in this country and you consume 25 percent of the [world’s] energy.... Yesterday morning, we were coming from the airport for instance, it was the traffic jam time, it was very packed in the highway coming from the airport here. I talked to the people in my car, looked outside, looked at the cars surrounding us. Out of a hundred cars, ninety-nine were occupied by a single person, the driver only. Cars occupying the highways, and burning fuel, how many gallons of fuel were burned yesterday morning, polluting the environment? That’s the extreme of individualism, this is capitalism.

“This planet cannot stand this model any longer.”²

This kind of global environmental argument is very difficult to sidestep. The planet – and least of all, our planet’s poor – cannot stand this pace of consumption much longer. Many already do not.

Perhaps poor health and poverty is a problem of overpopulation, as many well meaning and not-so-well meaning public health experts suggest. If we can agree that over consumption is one of most important engines driving poverty, then should we not decrease demand by helping to slow population growth? Especially in a place like Haiti where poor families tend to be large, access to contraception is limited (both in actual terms and in terms of gender

inequality / male control), and child bearing is a dangerous business where there are no medical services.

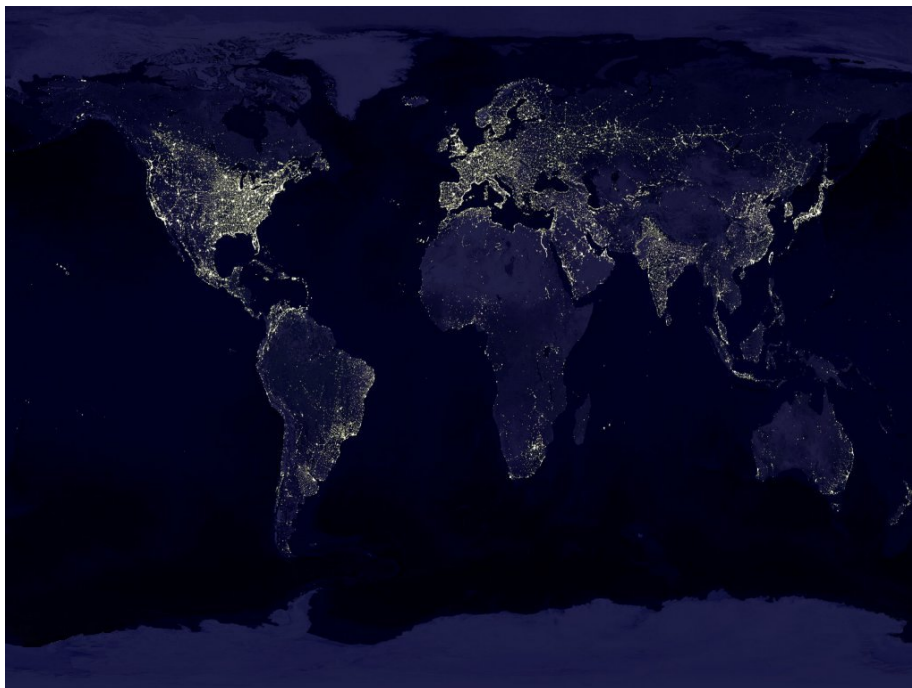
But from the perspective of the rural poor, the population is not large enough. The fertility rate (number of live births per woman) in Haiti is 4.0. This is compared to 2.0 in the US, 1.6 in neighboring Cuba, and 2.7 in the Dominican Republic which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti.³ Subsistence farming requires labor; in isolated rural life this comes most often from family members. With no meaningful government or system of social support, children are a form of ‘social security.’ The elderly here rely on their family for subsistence when their backs are prematurely broken from decades of back-breaking labor in the rocky mountains of Haiti. Infant mortality in Haiti is outrageously high, asserting even more pressure on women to have large families in the hopes that at least some children will survive into adulthood to support them.

From the perspective of resources – calculated, understood, scrimped and saved by the poor in ways the first world would never dream of – the rich world is overpopulated, not the poor world. As just one example, U.S.-Americans consume 183 times the electricity per capita than a Haitian consumes (Cuba and the DR consume roughly 19 times what is used in Haiti).⁴

There are simply too many U.S.-Americans on this planet for Cerca la Source to survive.

Yet it is the poor who die prematurely, in the countryside and in the urban slums. It is the poor who are washed away in this tide of consumption, landing in the crowded, sick, and deadly shantytowns of the world.

If you have any doubts about this logic, consider this satellite view of the earth at night:



The United States, Europe, Japan, and parts of Southeast Asia glow like the shining stars we collectively take ourselves to be. Haiti is invisible as is most of Africa, huge stretches of Asia, and other poor places on this planet. If light and the attached energy consumption does not stand in for overpopulation, how else should we measure it?

It feels from here – as it seems from the slums of Port-au-Prince – that the rich world, if it thinks of the poor at all, hopes the Cerca la Source’s of the world, and people who live here, will simply cease to exist.⁵ In my home country, the Bush administration left the Gulf Coast to disappear – sitting on their hands, fingers crossed – hoping it would slip quietly into the Gulf of Mexico as the polluted flood waters of Hurricane Katrina receded. What a relief it would have been if these – mostly Black – communities simply disappeared?

And some of these communities did disappear. Those not moral enough to have a car or credit card to ride northward away from the storm were shuffled onto busses and airplanes, many without the dignity of knowing where they were headed. They were disappeared into hotel rooms, Astrodomes, and into generous communities willing to take in the homeless. Some of the most wealthy – and therefore most righteous. What else is material success but a sign of virtue? – celebrated. In the September 9, 2005 Wall Street Journal Congressman Richard Baker (R., La), let slip the good news in his heart. “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”⁶ Hurricane Katrina was no longer a tragedy, but nothing short of divine intervention.

When the sight of floating bodies and exaggerated stories of murder and mayhem in the makeshift shelters of New Orleans became too much to ignore, the Administration grudgingly made some noise about helping. Mr. Bush himself flew over the area in his helicopter, nearly every day for a period. He did touch ground a few times, including a notable stop at the Mobile Alabama airport (far from physical and rhetorical harm’s way) and lamented the loss of his friend Trent Lott’s oceanfront Pascagoula, Mississippi multi-million dollar home. Mr. Bush had this to say:

*“The good news is -- and it's hard for some to see it now -- that out of this chaos is going to come a fantastic Gulf Coast, like it was before. Out of the rubbles of Trent Lott's house -- he's lost his entire house -- there's going to be a fantastic house. And I'm looking forward to sitting on the porch.”*⁷

Like plantation owners of old, it was easy to imagine Mr. Bush and his notoriously racist friend sitting on the porch, surveying all they take to be theirs. I’m sure they will not be disappointed and will, soon, sit again on the fresh painted porch when the racist social order of the South is rebuilt in their image. Three days later, president Bush’s mother, out of the charity of her heart, paid a visit to some of evacuees sent to Houston. She had this to say:

“So many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this (she chuckles slightly) is working very well for them.”

– NPR Radio, Marketplace, September 5, 2005

Apparently, the poor don’t even need to disappear. The poor are a nameless and faceless *them* even in plain sight. Things are working well indeed.

October 4, 2005

Today is a feast day in Cerca la Source. The village has been alive and buzzing for days to prepare the feast of St. Francis of Assisi – the patron saint of our Catholic church and of this village. The plain, cavernous church is packed shoulder to shoulder, perhaps a thousand people inside. Singing, praying, talking. Several thousand more are outside on the patch of dirt where a town square would be, if there were money to build one here. Heavy rains last night turned the square into a mud slick – now matted down by countless feet into a crosswork of busy paths.

The empty, dusty square that greeted us as we arrived several days ago is now a blur of activity, a cacophony of people. Young and old. Selling food, moonshine, single cigarettes, candles, and colorful, intricate ropes to be worn or hung at the altar. Others sit beside the church selling hope in the form of roulette and dice games.



From where I sit in our clinic, just behind the church, I can hear the guitar and bells and singing of the church service. It has been going strong for two days now. I can hear the faithful praying at their makeshift alters outside. I hear the *marchann* rhythmically hocking their wares in the street. I hear the drums and bells and singing of worshipers dancing in small circles around the square. Behind it all, I can hear the slow monotonous rhythm of couples dancing Haitian *Kompa*, a close Caribbean cousin to salsa and bachata.

Vodou healers – some in colorful robes, surrounded by fellow worshipers; some with nothing more than an *asor* (ceremonial rattle), a candle, and a basin of water for blessings –

have taken up places around the church. While the priest inside presides over mass, the healers outside (and inside, for that matter) also pray. The best spots are in the shade beside the church. Hundreds of candles are burning beside them, around the foundation of church. One candle rests with an offering of a hollow gourd on top of a birth certificate, perhaps in memory of a child who died too young.

There is no separation here between Catholicism and indigenous religion, in either direction. An old saying about this country goes: Haiti is 100 percent Catholic and 100 percent vodouisant. Catholicism came with the French colonialists; vodou survived the middle passage and lives as direct extension of the African diaspora. The two have been mixing since Haiti's beginning. Under colonial rule, church was allowed – sometimes with Sunday as a day of rest for the slaves – but independent religious practice, feared then as it is feared now, was not. So the slaves adapted, pulling Catholicism into vodou. Haiti put the faces of the Catholic icons onto the familiar spirits they brought from Western Africa. Saint Patrick, with snakes at his feet, came to symbolize Dambala, the serpent spirit who holds up the four corner-posts of this world. The Black Virgin of Guadalupe came to symbolize Erzulie Dantor, the mysterious and powerful incarnation of Erzulie who is both loved and feared. And so on.

Born under stress, Haitian vodou – indeed all of Haitian culture – still survives the heavy burden it bears on its shoulders. Vodou survived the temple and drum burnings organized during the U.S. occupation between 1915-1934. It survived the U.S.-sponsored Catholic anti-vodou campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s, as it survived the diffusion of its practice into a sensationalized tourist spectacle in the 1960s and 1970s. Vodou today survives deliberate attempts at misunderstanding, as it survives wave after wave of arrogant evangelical missionaries. Haiti and Haitian culture – however bloodied and bruised – will also survive the overpopulation and over-consumption of the rich world. The poor will not just go away. Human potential – however ravaged and starved by the rigors of deep poverty – will persist. The uniquely human potential to love, sing, mourn, pray, and dance will survive.

Cerca la Source will remain near the source of poverty. Not because of its remote location here high in Haiti's Central Plateau but because of its political and economic proximity to the Great Consumer to the north, *lot bo dlo a*, on the other side of the water. We are near the source indeed: 500 years of colonialism; global ecological suicide; the unbelievable heavy price Haiti has paid for the only successful slave revolution in history; one and a half hours by plane from Miami.



Notes:

¹ “Slum Politics,” by James Westcott. Available at www.alternet.org/story/21297. Two of the books discussed in this article are also relevant: *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* (Routledge Press) by Robert Neuwirth and *Planet of the Slums* (Verso) by Mike Davis.

² From DemocracyNow, September 19, 2005. A full transcript and broadcast audio/video are available at www.democracynow.org

³ Statistics from the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Human Development Report 2005, available at www.undp.org. Fertility rates are highest in sub-Saharan Africa where many countries have a rate of 6-7 live births per woman. Also of note, just 27 percent of the population has access to contraception in Haiti – as compared to 76, 73, and 70 percent in the US, Cuba, and Dominican Republic respectively. In our own communities in the Central Plateau, we have noted a significant decrease in family size among our employees who have access to contraception and stable wage-earning work.

⁴ Kilowatt hours per capita per year are 13,456, 1,395, 1326, and 73 for the U.S., Cuba, DR, and Haiti respectively. Available at www.undp.org

⁵ Not only are the poor inside Port-au-Prince’s slums being ‘disappeared’ by starvation, disease, and in front of the guns of Haitian and UN troops. They are also being systematically excluded from the January 2006 elections, which themselves hold no hope of a meaningful, representative result. The democratic government of Jean Bertrand Aristide provided 10,000 election registration offices and polling places nationwide. The Interim Latortue Government plans to install about 800. With one month to go before the January elections, Cite Soleil has no polling place for its 300,000 inhabitants. The nearby slum called Bel-Air has just one for a similar population. The vast Central Plateau where Cerca la Source is located has only 3 polling places for a population of over 250,000. If the poor are not polite enough to actually disappear, they can be easily excluded from representation. See “‘Electoral Cleansing’ in Haiti Violates Human Rights and Democracy,” by Brian Concannon, September 29, 2005 available at <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/816>

⁶ Reference found in Harpers Magazine, November 2005. “Notebook: Slum clearance.” Lewis H Lapham. Pp. 9-11.

⁷ September 2, 2005. Available at the official White House Website, at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050902-2.html