INTRODUCTION

Fleas dream of buying themselves a dog, and nobodies dream of escaping poverty: that one magical day good luck will suddenly rain down on them—will rain down in buckets. But good luck doesn’t rain down yesterday, today, tomorrow, or ever. Good luck doesn’t even fall in a fine drizzle, no matter how hard the nobodies summon it, even if their left hand is tickling, or if they begin the new day with their right foot, or start the new year with a change of brooms.

The nobodies: nobody’s children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way.

Who are not, but could be.
Who don’t speak languages, but dialects.
Who don’t have religions, but superstitions.
Who don’t create art, but handicrafts.
Who don’t have culture, but folklore.
Who are not human beings, but human resources.
Who do not have faces, but arms.
Who do not have names, but numbers.
Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local paper.
The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them.

Eduardo Galeano, “The Nobodies”

The people in a number of the stories are of the kind that many writers have recently got in the habit of referring to as “the little people.” I regard this phrase as patronizing and repulsive. There are no little people in this book. They are as big as you are, whoever you are.

Joseph Mitchell, McSorley’s Wonderful Saloon

In the summer of 1999, in the company of friends and co-workers, I crossed the border between Mexico and Guatemala. The frontier was heavily militarized on the Mexican side. We were searched there, as we had been searched elsewhere in Chiapas: with up to seventy thousand
troops stationed in the region, the Mexican government can readily do a good deal of rummaging.¹

We walked across the frontier uneventfully and there, close to the appointed hour, met our friend. Call her Julia. A broad smile broke over her face, a beautiful and reflective one; long black hair fell over her back, and she wore the traditional attire (a braided multicolored sash and frock) of her people, the Mam. The smile belied the great suffering Julia had seen. Her husband, a health worker, had been “disappeared” by Guatemalan security forces on the Mexican side of the border and had never been heard from again. Her nineteen-year-old brother, a rebel soldier, had been killed in combat, his body displayed as a grisly trophy for the Guatemalan army. She herself had lived a long decade of mourning and exile in Mexico. But now her smile spoke of new and restorative projects.

All of us—friends from the States, from Mexico, and from Guatemala—were bound together, most of us for over a decade, by our work in health care. Julia was also an international visitor, in a sense: like so many from the region, she had lived for years in refugee camps in Mexico, where she and others had worked to improve the health first of fellow refugees and, later, of the poor of Chiapas.² Now that she had returned to her home in highland Guatemala, we were to meet her surviving family and to discuss a community health project with Julia and her compañeros from the refugee camps.

Soon after we reached the outskirts of the town of Huehuetenango, we parked our pickup truck near a small cement house, pale blue. We found Julia’s family engrossed in a movie, perhaps of Mexican or European provenance, about Guatemalan refugees. We signaled our interest in watching along. I didn’t catch the name of the film, but it was clear that it treated the worst years of the killing—the years during which Julia lost her husband. In the course of almost four decades of armed violence, some two hundred thousand died in Guatemala, the majority of them civilians killed by the army.³ The bit of the movie we caught brought foreign involvement into relief. Judging from the accent, one of the actors was meant to represent a gringo.

After half an hour or so, Julia’s father stopped the movie—it was a videotape—and put on an impromptu concert for us. He and two of his sons stood together and played the marimba (a percussion instrument that looks like a giant xylophone). They later showed us pictures of Julia’s martyred brother and proudly underlined his name on the “honor roll of heroic guerrillas.” It was chill and damp in the house, which was...
warmed only by bare lightbulbs, but we all felt a great warmth, as if being welcomed back after a long and unforeseen separation.

The next morning, we were to meet Julia and the leadership of the re-nascent health project. But first we were invited to attend part of a workshop. It was being held in a parish school at the end of a muddy road that led up one of the small mountains looming over Huehuetenango. The topic of the workshop: gender relations. The pupils were natives, the instructors two young women from the capital city. The instructors were slender and wore jeans; they looked a lot like those of us who’d come from Boston. And since they spoke the language of U.S. universities, or its echoes in foundations and international bureaucracies, they sounded a lot like us, too.

More specifically, the women from Guatemala City were conducting a “gender-sensitivity workshop.” They had asked each of those present—about twenty locals, mostly young women, although Julia’s father was there, too—to draw a scene from childhood. The adult pupils sat crammed into children’s desks, supplied with crayons. One of the facilitators would hold aloft a drawing and ask the artist, and occasionally the audience, questions about it. The theme of the questions was gender relations.

It was difficult to know how all this was being received—the participants were impassive and spoke only when the women from Guatemala City addressed them. Some, it was clear, did not speak Spanish well; at least one young woman needed a translator. Furthermore, the prominence of dramatic biographical events—deaths, most notably, but also violence that had little to do with gender relations within the indigenous communities—kept pushing the discussion off the course charted by the facilitators. One young woman explained that the death of her mother in childbirth meant that at the age of ten she had by necessity assumed a great deal of responsibility for the care of her younger siblings:

Facilitator (expectantly): “So your father treated you differently because you were a girl?”

Respondent (matter-of-factly): “No, not really. He loved us all the same.”

A stilted silence followed. I felt uncomfortable, and so, I could tell, did my co-workers. (Ophelia’s cheeks were flaming.) It was not the silence that rankled. It seemed to us that the exercise was demeaning—the participants, having survived genocide and displacement, were now
being treated like children. They were being asked to respond to an agenda imported from capital cities, from do-gooder organizations like ours, from U.S. universities with the “right” answers to their every question. No harm done, perhaps, and the topic was important—but how helpful was this exercise, with its aim of changing the mentality of the locals, who were, after all, the victims of the previous decades of violence? A change in mentality was needed, certainly, but it was needed in the hearts and minds of those with power—and they were not here but in Guatemala City and Washington, D.C.

Julia signaled that it was time to leave the workshop and meet with the health committee. I was relieved. As we walked across a courtyard into a low, dark cooking area with a dirt floor, I whispered to Ophelia that I hoped we were not going to receive a proposal for “workshops designed to change the mentality of the victims.” We had not come all the way to Guatemala to seek to reform the minds or the culture of the victims.

I should not have worried. The scarred but passionate veterans of the health committee were not about to field inane proposals. The next hour was bracing. The air, thick with smoke from the fires bubbling under two nearby cauldrons, was electric; and the discussion had a rare clarity, as Julia and the small group of survivors laid out their plans. They wanted to continue the work they’d begun before the war: promoting community health through training, education, and service. And the project they wanted our help with was a mental health project for which they had despaired of securing funding.

They wanted to exhume the dead. They wanted to locate and disinter those buried in mass graves by the army. Why? Because the victims had been “buried with their eyes wide open.” And neither they nor their kin would know peace until they were buried properly. “So that their eyes may close,” explained Miguel, who, along with Julia, spoke as their leader.

My own eyes were stinging, but not from the smoke. Again, a silence fell over us, this time a silence of complicity and solidarity. Ophelia spoke first, saying that we who would never know their suffering would try to do our part, and also that we would bear witness in the hope that such crimes could not be committed so readily in the future.4

In the sunny courtyard, the noise of Spanish mixed with local tongues drifted into hearing: the gender workshop was over. Our private meeting gave way to a meal of tortillas, tough beef, and beans. As I got up to fill my bowl, a poster caught my eye. It bore the imprimatur of the Catholic Church. Its message, though consonant with Catholic social
teachings, would have struck Bostonian parishioners as out of place: “Down with neoliberalism,” it said in rainbow colors, “Up with humanity!” Next to it hung a small portrait of the recently martyred Bishop Juan José Gerardi. Two days before he was bludgeoned to death in 1998—by officers in the army, according to our hosts—the bishop had released a massive report indicting the army as responsible for 85 percent of the deaths and disappearances during the conflict. Releasing the report was risky, he noted in the last speech he was ever to make, but it was the only way to begin any meaningful process of healing:

In our country, the truth has been twisted and silenced. God is inflexibly opposed to evil in any form. The root of the downfall and the misfortune of humanity comes from the deliberate opposition to truth, which is the fundamental reality of God and of human beings. This reality has been intentionally distorted in our country throughout thirty-six years of war against the people.5

The images and events we experienced during these twenty-four hours—rummaging Mexican soldiers, a martyred teenager and a martyred bishop, the workshop of well-meaning elites from the capital, a mental health project involving exhumation, a cry against neoliberalism—encapsulate as well as anything can the heart of what I hope to write about in these pages. But how are these images and themes related to health and human rights? Take the term “neoliberalism,” which, like the related word “liberal,” admits to many meanings, some of them contradictory. Neoliberalism generally refers to the ideology that advocates the dominance of a competition-driven market model. Within this doctrine, individuals in a society are viewed, if viewed at all, as autonomous, rational producers and consumers whose decisions are motivated primarily by economic or material concerns. But this ideology has little to say about the social and economic inequalities that distort real economies.

In Latin America, neoliberal policies and ideologies have generally called for the subjugation of political and social life to a set of processes termed “market forces.”6 As a physician who has worked for much of my adult life among the poor of Haiti and the United States, I know that the laws of supply and demand will rarely serve the interests of my patients.7 And so they and others in their position—globally, this would be hundreds of millions—have fought to construe as a basic human right access to health care, education, and other social services. Indeed, many would argue that most of Latin America’s conflicts have been fought over neoliberalism; in the region today, far too many human rights abuses are
committed in the name of protecting and promoting some variant of “market” ideology.\textsuperscript{8}

This interpretation is at odds, I know, with U.S. notions of liberalism. Aren’t “liberals” the great defenders of human rights? friends there ask, exasperated. They are defenders of my rights and yours, I respond, but people like us are in a distinct minority, as Immanuel Wallerstein reminds us:

Liberals have always claimed that the liberal state—reformist, legalist, and somewhat libertarian—was the only state that could guarantee freedom. And for the relatively small group whose freedom it safeguarded this was perhaps true. But unfortunately that group always remained a minority perpetually en route to becoming everyone.\textsuperscript{9}

The liberal political agenda has rarely included the powerless, the destitute, the truly disadvantaged. It has never concerned itself with those popularly classified as the “undeserving” poor: drug addicts, sex workers, illegal “aliens,” welfare recipients, or the homeless, to name a few. It is even less concerned with populations beyond national borders. And yet the poor in the countries with which I am most familiar are struggling, and often failing, to survive:

To put it in systematic terms poverty in the First World is understood in terms of a relative distance from certain standards of human well-being that have been realized in the past but that are now seen less and less frequently. The frame of reference continues to be positive—a degree of well-being attained once upon a time and still attainable. In Latin America, however, the most obvious and spontaneous frame of reference for the concept of poverty is not something positive, but something negative in the extreme: death. In our countries, concrete poverty is misery verging on death. The poor are those whose greatest task is to try to survive.\textsuperscript{10}

This book is a physician-anthropologist’s effort to reveal the ways in which the most basic right—the right to survive—is trampled in an age of great affluence, and it argues that the matter should be considered the most pressing one of our times. The drama, the tragedy, of the destitute sick concerns not only physicians and scholars who work among the poor but all who profess even a passing interest in human rights. It’s not much of a stretch to argue that anyone who wishes to be considered humane has ample cause to consider what it means to be sick and poor in the era of globalization and scientific advancement.

\textit{Pathologies of Power} uses case studies to examine the struggle for social and economic rights as they are related to health. Since a physician
must have access to medicines and supplies in order to work on behalf of the victims of human rights violations thus defined, you would think that physicians would be deeply involved in pressing for social and economic rights. And since anthropologists often work in settings of violence and privation, you would think that anthropologists might have contributed heavily to our understanding of the dynamics of human rights violations. To date, however, human rights scholarship has been largely the province of lawyers and juridical experts; reports and documentation have been more likely to come from church groups and nongovernmental organizations than from academics. With a few notable exceptions (many of them cited in these pages), physicians and anthropologists have had far too little to say about human rights. But as a physician to the poor, I have seen what has happened, and what continues to happen, to those whose rights and freedoms—particularly freedom from want—are not safeguarded. As an anthropologist, I can discern the outlines of many of the ideologies used to conceal or even justify assaults on human dignity.

This training also helps to reveal that such assaults are not haphazard. The stage is set for more of the same, even though we are reassured by the powerful that the age of barbarism is behind us. It is disingenuous, surely, to affect surprise each time we learn of the complex and international processes that lead to another Haiti, another Chiapas, another Rwanda. ¹¹ One is reminded of the old joke: What is the definition of a liberal? Someone who believes all the bad things that happen in the world stem from accidents. ¹² Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm. If assaults on dignity are anything but random in distribution or course, whose interests are served by the suggestion that they are haphazard?

We live in a time in which violence is right before our very eyes. The word is applied to extremely varied contexts, but each is marked by open violence—by violent acts, fury, hatred, massacres, cruelty, collective atrocities—but also by the cloaked violations of economic domination, of capital-labor relations, of the great North-South divide, to say nothing of all of the “every-
day” violences perpetrated against the weak: women, children, all those excluded by the social system.

Françoise Héritier, De la violence

The term “human rights abuse” has been used to describe many offenses. There are, of course, the conventionally defined violations outlined in the various treaties and charters to which the guilty parties—nation-states, by and large—are so often signatories. But I will also discuss other forms of violence I have observed.

For well over a decade, I have grappled, as have many others, with conditions that could only be described as violent—at least to those who must endure them. Since the misery in question need not involve bullets, knives, or implements of torture, this misery has often eluded those seeking to identify violence and its victims. Decades ago, and at about the same time, liberation theologians and scholars such as Johan Galtung began writing of “structural violence.” In this book, as elsewhere, I use this term as a broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestedly human rights abuses, some of them punishment for efforts to escape structural violence, as the Jesuit Jon Sobrino notes:

Statistics no longer frighten us. But pictures of the starving children of Biafra, of Haiti, or of India, with thousands sleeping in the streets, ought to. And this entirely apart from the horrors that befall the poor when they struggle to deliver themselves from their poverty: the tortures, the beheadings, the mothers who somehow manage to reach a refuge, but carrying a dead child—a child who could not be nursed in flight and could not be buried after it had died. The catalogue of terrors is endless.

Amartya Sen has referred to such destructive forces as “unfreedoms.” Sen helps us to move beyond “liberal” notions of nominal political freedoms—most victims of structural violence have such freedoms on paper—without falling into the trap of economic reductionism: “Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over-activity of repressive states. Despite unprecedented increases in overall opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers—perhaps even the majority—of people.”
Referring to violations of social and economic rights as well as civil and political ones (for it is my claim that the former abuses permit the latter), I ask questions about death by starvation or AIDS in central Haiti; about death from tuberculosis within Russian prisons; about the causes and consequences of coups d’état and low-intensity warfare in Chiapas, Haiti, and Guatemala; and about the practice of medicine in settings of great structural violence. In each of these situations, acts of violence are perpetrated, usually by the strong against the weak, in complex social fields. In each of these situations, a set of historically given and, often enough, economically driven conditions—again, here termed “structural violence”—guarantee that violent acts will ensue. In each of these situations, actions could have been—still can be—taken to protect the vulnerable. But the actions in question include more than legal protection of civil and political rights. For surely we have learned that the right to vote, for example, has not protected the poor from dying premature deaths, caused as often as not by readily treatable pathogens. The “nobodies” discussed by Eduardo Galeano are the victims of structural violence, and a physician working in post-Duvalier Haiti—or post-apartheid South Africa—would necessarily want to know why structural violence takes more and younger lives than ever before.

In short, civil rights cannot really be defended if social and economic rights are not. But in fact there is heated opposition to any enlargement of the rights concept. Some of it comes from the expected quarters. Jeane Kirkpatrick, one of the architects of Ronald Reagan’s Central American policies, which helped finance the Guatemalan army’s genocidal spree, termed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “a letter to Santa Claus,”16 in large part because the Declaration pressed for social and economic rights.17 But even those who protect, rather than abuse, human rights seem to feel discomfort about social and economic rights. Pressing for social and economic rights, even those outlined in the Universal Declaration, is seen as “asking for too much.” Thus even staunch supporters of civil and political rights may regard economic and social rights as better suited to a letter to Santa Claus, since they argue that more can be accomplished by defining our mission in a “pragmatically” narrow manner.18

Pragmatism assuredly has its role even in utopian struggles: to attempt too much is often to achieve too little. But the hesitation of many in the human rights community to cross the line from a rights activism of pure principles to one involving transfers of money, food, and medicine betrays a failure, I think, to address the urgent needs of the people we are
trying to defend. The proponents of harsh market ideologies have never been afraid to put money—and sometimes bullets—behind their minimal and ever-shrinking conception of rights and freedoms. But one alarming feature of structural violence is that bullets are increasingly unnecessary when defenders of social and economic rights are silenced by technocrats who regard themselves as “neutral.” In an acid commentary entitled “Professional Life/3,” Galeano lays bare the lineaments of this new and effective form of terrorism:

The big bankers of the world, who practice the terrorism of money, are more powerful than kings and field marshals, even more than the Pope of Rome himself. They never dirty their hands. They kill no one: they limit themselves to applauding the show.

Their officials, international technocrats, rule our countries: they are neither presidents nor ministers, they have not been elected, but they decide the level of salaries and public expenditure, investments and divestments, prices, taxes, interest rates, subsidies, when the sun rises and how frequently it rains.

However, they don’t concern themselves with the prisons or torture chambers or concentration camps or extermination centers, although these house the inevitable consequences of their acts.

The technocrats claim the privilege of irresponsibility: “We’re neutral,” they say.¹⁹

Galeano links the “terrorism of money” to technocrats who describe themselves as neutral. I suspect this commentary has a certain resonance for anyone who moves easily between a rich university and a poor village, between a world-class teaching hospital and a dirt-floored dispensary, between the gleaming towers of international agency headquarters and the sprawling slums of a Latin American city. Human rights cannot be easily defended in a time of widespread, indeed growing, terrorism of the sort Galeano describes. Although it may seem impolitic to underline the inadequacy of existing measures, it is necessary, at some point, to acknowledge what the poor have been saying all along: that their rights cannot be protected while the “present economic and social structures foist” injustice and exploitation “upon the vast majority of our people under the guise of law.”²⁰ These laws, even those designed to protect human rights, don’t feel neutral at all.

While appreciating the need for high-minded charters, conventions, and legislation, it is also important to ask why it is so difficult to demonstrate the efficacy of these measures. This critique is offered in a constructive manner. If laws and charters are inadequate—and they clearly
fail to perform under any but the most favorable conditions—what additional measures might be taken? From the point of view of a physician, it seems obvious that tackling poverty and inequality is central to any good-faith effort to protect the rights of the poor. The terrorism of money thus far evades and is abetted by existing legislation. It may well prove to be the biggest threat to recent gains in both health and human rights.

The headlong stream is termed violent
But the river bed hemming it in is
Termed violent by no one.

The storm that bends the birch trees
Is held to be violent
But how about the storm
That bends the backs of the roadworkers?

Bertolt Brecht, “On Violence”

This is also a book about the dynamics of rights violations. The struggle to develop a human rights paradigm is one thing; a searching analysis of the mechanisms and conditions that generate these violations is quite another. Without understanding power and connections, how do we understand why rights are abused, and when and where such events are likely to occur? Often enough, identifying victims and aggressors is the easy part—and leads to no real understanding. It’s not that things are “not so black and white,” as academics and pundits are wont to say, usually dismissively. They are plenty black and white. But they are also gray, and every shade of gray, so that strange and often veiled alliances form a bridge between aggressors and victims.

Take, for example, the case of Rwanda. In a study titled *Aiding Violence*, Peter Uvin argues that development and humanitarian aid to Rwanda in the years prior to the genocide helped to set the stage for what was to occur: “the process of development and the international aid given to promote it interacted with the forces of exclusion, inequality, pauperization, racism, and oppression that laid the groundwork for the 1994 genocide.” 21 Of course, the development enterprise, like the human rights community, has defined its mission narrowly. The technocratic approach to development aid has mandated that some issues are brought to the fore while others are ignored. As Uvin, commenting on his own and others’ blindness, notes:
Like almost all other players in the development community, I did not have any idea of the destruction that was to come. The pauperization was omnipresent, the racist discourse loud; fear was visible in people’s eyes, and a militarization was evident, but that was none of my business, for I was there for another Rwanda, the development model.22

How, one wonders incredulously, could anyone working on behalf of the Rwandan poor have failed to anticipate the oncoming cataclysm? But such blinkered analyses are common in most settings in which massive human rights violations are about to occur. As Uvin suggests, these visual-field defects stem in part from the disciplinary division of labor so important in our times. The social fields in which human rights are violated are complex beyond the understanding of any one view or discipline. These contexts are also laden with symbolic complexities, and actions taken within them are often undergirded by baroque ideological justifications—in short, this is the stuff of conventional anthropological interest. But if I have persuaded you that human rights discourse might be examined profitably by an anthropologist, it is important to add that anthropologists have also neglected to examine structural violence and the abuses it inevitably breeds. In a now classic essay, Orin Starn depletes the failure of his fellow Andeanists to consider the terrible suffering all around them, even though a guerrilla war was soon to wrack Peru for a decade:

Ethnographers usually did little more than mention the terrible infant mortality, minuscule incomes, low life expectancy, inadequate diets, and abysmal health care that remained so routine. To be sure, peasant life was full of joys, expertise, and pleasures. But the figures that led other observers to label Ayacucho a region of “Fourth World” poverty would come as a surprise to someone who knew the area only through the ethnography of Isbell, Skar, or Zuidema. They gave us detailed pictures of ceremonial exchanges, Saint’s Day rituals, weddings, baptisms, and work parties. Another kind of scene, just as common in the Andes, almost never appeared: a girl with an abscess and no doctor, the woman bleeding to death in childbirth, a couple in their dark adobe house crying over an infant’s sudden death.23

As one might expect, Starn’s essay provoked fairly heated riposte. Umbrage was taken. In meetings and subsequent articles, anthropologists protested that they had written of such conditions.24 But almost a decade later, Linda Green, in her compelling study of Mayan widows in the western highlands of Guatemala, still complains of “anthropology’s diverted gaze”—diverted, of course, from structural violence:
Systematic inquiry into human rights violations remained elusive. Despite an alarming rise in the most blatant forms of transgressions, repression, and state terrorism, the topic has not captured the anthropological imagination until recently. Overwhelming empirical evidence demonstrates that state-sponsored violence has been standard operating procedure in numerous contemporary societies where anthropologists have conducted fieldwork for the past three decades.25

Green’s study, unlike many of its predecessors, explores the “macrologics of power” without sacrificing ethnographic depth.26 To study Mayan widows without exploring the mechanisms that transformed them from wives to widows would be to miss the opportunity to reveal the inner workings of structural violence (and to bury the dead with their eyes wide open). This machinery is transnational as much as it is local. It has a history. And yet I have sat through conferences in which the fate of Mayan orphans is discussed at great length with no mention of what happened to their parents. Indeed, a focus on atomistic cultural specificities is usually the order of the day. This is what anthropologists are expected to do. So it is with “anthropological” commentary on human rights. I use quotation marks because, as often as not, such commentary is made by non-anthropologists who draw on the concept of cultural relativism, a concept that many consider—in my view—incorrectly, in my view—anthropology’s chief contribution to human rights debates.27

Allow me to give another example of how the concept of culture may be abused, and how power and transnational connections may be overlooked in contemporary examinations of human rights abuses. It arises from Haiti, the case I know best. By adopting the conventional Haitian manner of asking a riddle or pointed question—the riddler asks Krik?, the audience unleashes the riddle by exclaiming Krak!—let us examine some facts from the 1991 coup d’état that resulted in the most massive human rights violations in recent Haitian memory.

Krik? Who said this? “The foreign powers who dominate Haiti have for more than a century refused to acknowledge the integrity of Haitian culture and our right as the world’s first independent black nation to steer our own ship of state.”

Krak! “General” Raoul Cédras, in a 1991 radio address delivered in French shortly after he overthrew Haiti’s first democratically elected president.28
What, one might ask, does such a high-minded statement (coming from such a source) reveal about power and transnational connections? First, it offers us a chance to recall that the modern Haitian army led by Cédras had been created by an act of the U.S. Congress during our nineteen-year military occupation of that country earlier in the twentieth century. Second, it reminds us that Cédras was himself the beneficiary of training, including workshops on human rights, at military institutions within the United States.

Third, we can note that his comments, delivered in a language that 90 percent of the Haitian population cannot speak, were crafted with an international audience in mind. This audience is ostensibly concerned with human rights and also with such matters as “cultural integrity” and “racial pride.” To the extent that anyone was swayed by such comments—and the record shows that some were—the thousands of Haitians who had been killed outright in the weeks prior to Cédras’s address could be impugned as traitors and stooges. As long as Cédras dominated the airwaves, they were silenced beyond the grave. To use the Guatemalan metaphor yet again: they had been buried with their eyes wide open.

To heap irony upon irony, and again playing to an international audience, the authors of the coup d’État chose as their first prime minister a certain Jean-Jacques Honorat—“a leading human rights figure,” said the Boston Globe. Known in Haiti as a stooge of power, Honorat did not disappoint. He claimed that the Haitian army had done the nation a great service in doing away with the dangerous riffraff who were calling for a more just distribution of Haiti’s resources and in dispatching their loony leader, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Honorat—who was indeed a member of the “human rights community,” which says a great deal about said community—painted Aristide as the primary violator of human rights in Haiti, an allegation that, though baseless, found ready echoes in the corridors of power and in the U.S. press.

The initial response of the human rights community to the Cédras-led coup was faltering, at best. With powerful friends and lobbyists abroad, the Haitian army could succeed in convincing some that the overthrown president had been Haiti’s chief human rights violator. And sectors of the foreign press—notably, U.S. television and print media—echoed, without much further inquiry, the claims of the army. Thus many within the human rights community subsequently sought an impossible balance-point between two adversaries: the demonstrably violent Haitian army and the allegedly violent and unstable deposed
president-in-exile. Such studied “neutrality” led some to believe that truth and justice lay somewhere between the victims and the aggressors, rather than on the side of the real victims. The problem was that no data ever existed to suggest that the deposed president had violated human rights, whereas a growing pile of evidence, and of bodies, demonstrated clearly that the military had.

We can make similar observations in considering the case of Chiapas, where the rebellion has pitted the rural poor against the Mexican government. Was this “ethnic revitalization”—most of the Zapatista rebels were indigenous people—or a broader movement for social and economic rights? Many statements from the rebels would seem to indicate the latter. On January 18, 1994, Zapatista leaders responded to the Mexican government’s offer of conditional pardon with the following retort: “Who must ask for pardon and who can grant it?”

Why do we have to be pardoned? What are we going to be pardoned for? Of not dying of hunger? Of not being silent in our misery? Of not humbly accepting our historic role of being the despised and the outcast? . . . Of having demonstrated to the rest of the country and the entire world that human dignity still lives, even among some of the world’s poorest peoples? 31

Many argue that it is no coincidence that Mexico’s first uprising in decades began on the day that NAFTA—the North American Free Trade Agreement—was signed. It was also no surprise that poor health figured strongly among the complaints of the peasants in rebellion. In a declaration at the outset of the revolt, the Zapatistas noted that, “in Chiapas, 14,500 people die a year, the highest death rate in the country. What causes most of these deaths? Curable diseases: respiratory infections, gastroenteritis, parasites, malaria, scabies, breakbone fever, tuberculosis, conjunctivitis, typhus, cholera, and measles.” 32 The declaration further noted that all of this misery was expanding right under the noses of tourists and others who visited the region: “While there are seven hotel rooms for every 1,000 tourists, there are 0.3 hospital beds for every 1,000 Chiapans.” 33

But scholarly observers tended to frame the rebellion as an ethnic uprising. Indeed, “anthro lite” seemed to abound among those who cheered for ethnic pride while ignoring, or being confounded by, the rebels’ calls for social and economic rights for the poor, regardless of ethnicity. One can find lots of treatises about “ancient Maya secrets” and other arcane lore, but few about maternal mortality, high rates of tuberculosis, or the
government’s ongoing failure to deliver on promised land reform. No more than the aid workers in Rwanda and the Andeanists in South America, the anthropologists in Chiapas were not there to study structural violence. After one of the conflict’s bloodiest civilian massacres, in December 1997, the lead editorial of the *Gaceta del Tecolote Maya*, a monthly publication for Mexican anthropologists, asked simply “¿Antropología para qué?” Anthropology to what end?

What about the observations of powerful governments? In this arena, we have long known that it is best to examine not what they say—in declarations, for example—but what they do. This book focuses primarily on Latin America, for it is here that we can most easily discern the effects of our own country’s stance on human rights. Such an exercise is less common than one might imagine, in large part because close scrutiny of human rights abuses in Latin America brings to light embarrassing connections: “For the U.S.A., the Western hemisphere is the obvious testing ground, particularly the Central America–Caribbean region, where Washington has faced few external challenges for almost a century. It is of some interest that the exercise is rarely undertaken, and when it is, it is castigated as extremist or worse.” Why should one be castigated as an extremist for pointing out the obvious connections between U.S. foreign policy—which, unlike the weather, is subject to human control—and human rights abuses? Perhaps because we do not want to know that U.S. aid “has tended to flow disproportionately,” as Lars Schoultz notes, “to Latin American governments which torture their citizens.”

This rings especially true in Haiti, to which aid flowed freely during almost all years of the Duvalier dictatorships and during much of the violent military rule that followed the collapse of the dictatorship in 1986. Now, however, during the rule of a democratically elected government, the United States has orchestrated an international aid embargo against the Haitian government, freezing an estimated $500 million in promised and greatly need assistance.

The “neoliberal era”—if that is the term we want—has been a time of looking away, a time of averting our gaze from the causes and effects of structural violence. Whatever term we use to describe our times, we cannot avoid looking at power and connections if we hope to understand, and thus prevent, human rights abuses. And when we look at and listen to those whose rights are being trampled, we see how political rights are intertwined with social and economic rights, or, rather, how the absence of social and economic power empties political rights of their
substance. In each of the places discussed at any length in this book—whether Chiapas or a U.S. military base in Cuba or a prison in western Siberia—the same sort of erasure is readily documented. Some of this erasure is a result, certainly, of the distortions introduced by a disciplinary focus. No one discipline could ever hope to capture the complexity, social and biological, of the assaults on health and human rights that I hope to document. But much of the erasure has a far more pernicious origin: hiding this suffering, or denying its real origins, serves the interests of the powerful. The degree to which literate experts, from anthropologists to international health specialists, choose to collude with such chicanery should be the focus of brisk and public debate. The persistence of such suffering, rooted in structural violence, concerns all of us, as the poet Wisława Szymborska has observed. “There is nothing more animal-like,” she writes, “than a clear conscience.”

We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity.

Revolutionary Proclamation of the Junta Tuitiva, La Paz, July 16, 1809

In some countries, dissidents are driven into exile; in others, they are driven to television talk shows. In the poor communities discussed here, those who challenge established privilege may be driven to the edge of a pit they themselves have been forced to dig and there dispatched with a bullet at close range. The central thesis of this book is that human rights abuses are best understood (that is, most accurately and comprehensively grasped) from the point of view of the poor. This too is a relatively novel exercise in the human rights community. In no arena is it more needed than in that of health and human rights.

The field of health and human rights has grown quickly, but its boundaries have yet to be traced. More than fifty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, consensus regarding the most promising directions for the future is lacking; moreover, outcome-oriented assessments lead us to question approaches that rely solely on recourse to formal civil and political rights. Similarly unpromising are approaches that rely solely on appeals to governments. Careful study reveals that state power has been responsible for most human rights violations and that violations are usually embedded in contexts rife with structural violence—again, social and economic inequities that
determine who will be at risk for assaults and who will be shielded from them.

But the dynamic is changing in much of the world: as international financial institutions and transnational corporations now dwarf the dimensions of most states, the former institutions—and the small number of powerful states that control them—come to hold unfettered sway over the lives of millions. International human rights organizations, accustomed to looking for villains in the upper reaches of bureaucracies of banana republics, also need to turn their gaze back toward the great centers of world power in which they reside. Only through careful analysis of growing transnational inequalities will we understand the complex social processes that structure not only growing disparities of risk but also what stands between us and a future in which social and economic rights are guaranteed by states or other polities. This is especially poignant when one considers the concept of the right of the world’s poor to modern medical care, because in the “neocolonial” era, the rich countries are even less likely to accept responsibility for better stewardship, as James Galbraith notes:

It is not increasing trade as such that we should fear. Nor is technology the culprit. To focus on “globalization” as such misstates the issue. The problem is a process of integration carried out since at least 1980 under circumstances of unsustainable finance, in which wealth has flowed upwards from the poor countries to the rich, and mainly to the upper financial strata of the richest countries.

In the course of these events, progress toward tolerable levels of inequality and sustainable development virtually stopped. Neocolonial patterns of center-periphery dependence, and of debt peonage, were reestablished, but without the slightest assumption of responsibility by the rich countries for the fate of the poor.

This book attempts to advance an agenda for research and action grounded in the struggle for social and economic rights, an agenda suited to public health and medicine and whose central contributions to future progress in human rights are linked to the equitable distribution of the fruits of scientific advancement. Such an approach is in keeping with the Universal Declaration but runs counter to several of the reigning ideologies of public health, including those favoring efficiency over equity.

Indeed, many of the concepts currently in vogue in public health—from “cost-effectiveness” to “sustainability” and “replicability”—are likely to be perverted unless social justice remains central to public health
and medicine. A human rights approach to health economics and health policy helps to bring into relief the ill effects of the efficacy-equity trade-off: that is, only if unnecessary sickness and premature death don’t matter can inegalitarian systems ever be considered efficacious.

*Pathologies of Power* suggests that a broad biosocial approach, when anchored in careful examination of specific cases, permits a critical reassessment of conventional views on human rights. To make this case, I link detailed case histories of individuals to broader analyses of health and human rights. The book charts the experience of several “communities on the edge”—HIV-positive Haitians detained on a U.S. military base, villagers in Haiti and Chiapas during military crackdowns, Russian prisoners with untreated or ineffectively treated tuberculosis—in order to explore the strengths and limitations of conventional approaches to human rights.

As noted, human rights discussions have to date been excessively legal and theoretical in focus. They seek to define rights, mandate punishment by appropriate authorities for the violators, enforce international treaties, and so on. A focus on health alters human rights discussions in important and underexplored ways: the right to health is perhaps the least contested social right, and a large community of health providers—from physicians to community health workers—affords a still-untapped vein of enthusiasm and commitment. Furthermore, this focus serves to remind us that those who are sick and poor bear the brunt of human rights violations. In making this argument, I draw freely on the critiques that a doctor to the poor is well placed to make.

*Pathologies of Power* is divided into two parts. The first four chapters rely heavily on my own experience in Latin America and Russia. That is, I have been an eyewitness to the events and processes described. Because all eyewitness accounts are both partial and “dated,” I have dated Chapters 2, 3, and 4 and also the postscripts that follow them. The second half of the book also draws on this experience, but it aims to lay out the framework of a critique of “liberal” views on human rights, since such views rarely serve the interests of the poor.

Chapter 1 presents the basic themes of the book, as delineated in this introduction, by arguing that the social determinants of health outcomes are also, often enough, the social determinants of the distribution of assaults on human dignity. “On Suffering and Structural Violence” asks how large-scale social forces become embodied as sickness, suffering, and degradation in rural Haiti, where the same forces that structure risk for human rights abuses are also those shaping epidemics of tuberculosis and
AIDS. Conventional readings of human rights violations fail to draw on current understandings of the social determinants of a wide variety of ills, lending a random appearance to what is, in fact, a highly predictable set of outcomes. Cultural relativism can further muddy these waters when it is linked to moral relativism and shoddy social analysis—as often occurs with the “identity politics” regnant in the United States. Because human rights violations are usually symptoms and signs of deeper pathologies of power, anthropology, sociology, history, political economy, and other “resocializing” disciplines have important roles to play if we are to understand how best to protect human rights. Pathologies of Power draws on social theory—and even liberation theology—to reintroduce the concept of structural violence and to link it to the acute violence of war crimes and systemic assaults against human rights.

I argue that equity is the central challenge for the future of medicine and public health. It is easy to document a growing “outcome gap” between rich and poor and show that it is caused in part by differential access to increasingly effective technologies. Drawing on the work of many, I underline the pathogenic role of inequity. That is, it is a striking fact that wealthy societies riven by social inequality have poorer health indices than societies in which comparable levels of wealth are more evenly distributed. At the same time, it is important to sound a warning about the habit of conflating the notion of society with that of nation-state. We already live in a global society. Thus, calls of a right to equity must necessarily contend with steep grades of inequality across as well as within international borders. The same holds for analyses of human rights abuses. Nationally framed analyses of human rights—such as those appearing in, for example, reports from human rights watchdog organizations—may obscure their fundamentally transnational nature.

Part I of the book then explores these themes through specific cases. Chapter 2, “Pestilence and Restraint,” details the experience of HIV-positive Haitian refugees fleeing a brutal military coup. Detained by the U.S. government on its base in Guantánamo, Cuba, the voices of these refugees went largely unheard. Meanwhile, elsewhere on the same island, the attention of the international media was drawn to another small group of people living with HIV: Cubans who found themselves in AIDS sanatoriums. Contrasting the experience of the two groups, and the attention each received, brings into sharp focus the forces shaping both the underlying policies and international responses to them.

Chapter 3, “Lessons from Chiapas,” reports on the situation in Mexico’s poorest state some four years after the Zapatista rebellion. Origi-
nally written in the days before the Acteal massacre of December 1997, this account explores what is at stake in the varied interpretations of the campesinos’ ongoing struggle for dignity. The experience of one community in quest of health suggests that the Zapatistas and their non-combatant supporters may have something to teach the human rights community.

Chapter 4, “A Plague on All Our Houses?” exposes prison epidemics of tuberculosis in Russia, showing that structural violence is again central to determining who is most likely to be imprisoned, who is most likely to become infected and sick once detained, and who is most likely to receive delayed or inappropriate treatment. This largely overlooked epidemic of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis will soon be too large to be hidden. The only way to halt what amounts to tuberculosis-as-punishment is to provide prompt and effective treatment to all prisoners. Even amnesty will be inadequate, if prisoners are released to a dismantled public health system that cannot cure them.

Part II of the book returns to general questions but remains closely tied to specific instances and places. “Health, Healing, and Social Justice” (Chapter 5) explores the differences among three approaches to development work. In comparing charity, development, and social justice approaches, it is important to note that only the latter encourages privileged actors such as physicians and academics to adopt a moral stance that would seek to expose and prevent pathologies of power. Chapter 6, “Listening for Prophetic Voices,” reports with alarm the combined effects of the expanding influence of a market ethos and a growing social inequality on the practice of medicine. With an “outcome gap” that widens whenever an effective intervention is not made available to those who need it most, it is clear that greater and faster medical progress can lead paradoxically to worse outcomes. Conventional medical ethics, mired as they are in the “quandary ethics of the individual,” do not often speak to these issues, because of the fact that the bulk of their attention is focused on individual cases where massive resources are invested in delivering services unlikely to ever benefit most patients.

Chapter 7, “Cruel and Unusual,” offers a more in-depth consideration of the prison-tuberculosis association. In addition to examining the obvious correlation between overcrowding and transmission of an airborne pathogen, this chapter asks how the constraint of agency through imprisonment is related not only to increased risk for sickness and death—which are not supposed to be part of the punishment package—but also to risk of the sort of erasure documented throughout this vol-
ume. In New York a decade ago and in Russia at this writing, social inequalities (including racism) and economic policies came together to produce epidemics of drug-resistant tuberculosis. Thus does drug-resistant tuberculosis come to constitute a human rights violation, a fact ignored by many in the human rights community.

These themes are explored more fully in Chapter 8, “New Malaise.” Although the quandaries of the sick in industrialized countries are important and should never be dismissed, the failure of ethics to grapple with the tragedy of the modern era’s destitute sick is nothing short of obscene. Obscene but not surprising. The same blind spots mentioned earlier are those that afflict today’s medical ethicists. Surely it is an ethical problem, for example, that in the coming year an estimated six million people will die of tuberculosis, malaria, and AIDS—three treatable diseases that reap their grim harvest almost exclusively among populations without access to modern medical care. These deaths are reflections of structural violence and should be a central concern for the human rights community.

The final chapter, “Rethinking Health and Human Rights,” reflects on the implications of the book’s central arguments for an emerging field of inquiry and action. The divorce of research and analysis from pragmatic efforts to remediate inequalities of access is a tactical and moral error—it may be an error that constitutes, in and of itself, a human rights abuse. A brief Afterword includes a personal postscript, a reflection on what it was like to bear witness to a decade of violence in Haiti and to hear outsiders—including some in the human rights community—offer erroneous interpretations of what was happening there.

In 1994, following the publication of a book in which I explored the roots of political violence in Haiti, the military government declared me persona non grata. This prevented me from fulfilling my obligation to patients in great need of medical services. It was an unpleasant exercise for other reasons: the book alienated some people whose opinions I value. All in all, it was an experience far less gratifying than direct service to the destitute sick; and I concluded that I would not write another book about human rights and structural violence. But the rest of the decade convinced me that such exercises, though unpopular, are important. When it is a matter of telling the truth and serving the victims, let unwelcome truths be told. Those of us privileged to witness and survive such events and conditions are under an imperative to unveil—and keep unveiling—these pathologies of power.