

Organized social resistance: an Oral History and Collective Health approach

Francisco Daniel Irigoyen Padilla, PhD; Margarita Pulido Navarro, PhD

Abstract

In this brief essay we take up the central categories that allow us to account for the life, work and health experiences of two education workers who have witnessed the intense period of struggle during the labor reform, disguised as "educational reform" that Peña Nieto imposed on education workers a few years ago. The identity shaped throughout life, in the social spaces of interaction is present. The incursion of oral history and social history, allows researchers a philosophical-epistemological reflection to approach the concrete totality, going from the sensible concrete, to the concrete thought, with the narratives of the protagonists through two life stories; one of them, that of a teacher with a long experience of struggle in favor of collective rights, from the organized social resistance; the other, is that of a teacher who balances from the canons of submission to hegemony. Both show subjectivity as the fundamental element to understand the paths through which health and illness are expressed and also allow to give way to an alternative to define healthy spaces where the emancipation of human capacities in the collectives to move towards health

Francisco Daniel Irigoyen Padilla. PhD

Doctor of Science in Collective Health; Consultant in human processes and psychotherapist; address: residential complex Lucca La Toscana, tower 8 number 730, Zipaquirá, Colombia.

E-mail: furdip@hotmail.com

Margarita Pulido Navarro. PhD

D. in Collective Health Sciences; Professor-researcher, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana -Xochimilco.

E-mail: mpulido@correo.xoc.uam.mx

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Introduction

In 2012, at the beginning of President Peña Nieto's administration, a labor reform disguised as "educational" was presented and approved with the purpose of making the hiring, promotion, and dismissal of Mexican education workers cheaper and more flexible. It proposed a new administrative and labor relationship in which teachers were transferred to a special regime, in which the government assumed unilateral control of labor relations, modifying the general working conditions.

The protests against the reforms were met with extreme repressive policies, as the result of which lives have been lost, and people tortured or unjustly imprisoned, among other atrocities. There was no policy to protect the health of protesters; on the contrary, the "Internal Security Law" was passed, which allowed the army to go out into the streets and carry out all orders of the president of the republic, including lethal force, against civilians or demonstrators.

Although Mexico is now living a very different historical moment, mainly due to the triumph of comrade President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the historical, class condition of the Oaxacan teachers continues to pose the need to resist the stripping of their rights and any arbitrary change imposed by governmental reforms. The teachers seek in their collective forms mechanisms of social change, forms that make sufficient counterweight to guarantee what the law has failed to grant. They do not stop, despite the injuries, disappearances, threats, extortions, and deaths.

The investigation, carried out in the twilight of the Peña Nieto administration, sought to understand what happens within the subjectivity of

the Oaxacan teachers in struggle. Although it is true that the grievances committed against them were incessant and serious, there are elements within the process of resistance itself that can be healthy and that, in a way, determine forms of coexistence (of living) that should not be lost, that are valuable for the social change that Collective Health seeks and proposes. From the position of this research, the teachers' struggle and qualitative research have a primordial function as a vehicle for the vindication of social classes and for the acquisition of a form of consciousness that is not alien to the concrete historical forms of production, a class consciousness.

For Marx¹ production not only produces man as a commodity. It also produces him as a mentally and physically dehumanized being. Under this premise, in every worker, not only the one who dedicates his life to teaching, there is a dialectic of confrontation, of constant adaptation to capital, of permanence, of escape, of rupture, of constant resistance.

In everyday life, people are forced to abide by the rules, to obey and to not show resistance. The institutions that sustain and reproduce the social system are the vehicle through which dominant ideas are internalized in society. Our beliefs give rise to attitudes, which derive into actions that, according to Villoro², reaffirm or give rise to beliefs.

For dialectical materialism, all phenomena of nature carry implicit internal contradictions. The dominant ideology that permeates all social spaces simultaneously gives rise to elements of resistance in people. This resistance finds two main routes or ways of expression:

The first is a silent, silenced, and hidden resistance, which according to Scott³, seeks to avoid social exclusion. People resist the dispossession to which they are subjected in a disguised manner. This tacit nonconformity has repercussions on their bodies, since silencing resistance does not resolve what gave rise to it, and those problems that are not openly confronted are perpetuated. The discomfort that people present due to issues that are not resolved can be characterized as accumulated stress, which is the human organism's way of trying to find balance within these unresolved issues.

The other way in which resistance is expressed is openly. People manifest, with a certain

degree of awareness, behaviors that seek to oppose the established or hegemonic discourse. The social struggle, and in particular the struggle of the Oaxacan teachers, is the manifestation of open resistance that we seek to study from the perspective of Collective Health.

López⁴ argues that the true process of illness or the way of becoming ill is found in the life history of the person. This is determined by the position occupied in the production of material life, and in the reproduction of the objects and symbolic forms that emanate in the long and abundant historical evolution⁵. So, if in the narrative of the workers we find the way of getting sick, we can also certainly find, in the people who actively participate in the organized social resistance, the ways of seeking health.

Recovering through the anthropological: Oral History

The category of identity is central to understanding the subjectivity of people, since it constitutes a link between the material conditions of existence of human beings and their subjectivity. Pulido⁶ emphasizes how identity can only be constructed through others by knowing oneself to be independent of others. This implies knowledge, albeit empirical, of a specific culture, in which diverse, coexisting identities are formed and constructed.

Both the identity and the position of the person before certain facts are not static, they can be affected by the fact itself and the responses derived from it. There is a process of transformation through which the perception is interpreted and reinterpreted, resulting in the production of meaning that is crossed by a whole life history⁴.

Official history, the one transmitted by the hegemonic class, is a history of the deeds of those considered "heroes". For Jung⁷, these are archetypal figures socially designed to exalt certain historical moments and events useful to capitalist social reproduction. It is a quantitative fragmentation of time into consecutive events. Braudel⁸ makes a harsh criticism when he states that "the official" does not seek to understand the long reach that history can have to explain social transformation and the human relations determined by it.

To move away from the narrative forms of the hegemonic classes, we must approach another

type of protagonists, those forgotten, those who must live the historical changes within the working mass, those people who almost never see the fruits of their participation in social transformations because it is not convenient for capital to make them aware that their collective acts are the engine that drives any revolutionary change. It is necessary to vindicate the forgotten and take up their experiences, and that is why the position of oral history linked to social history is still so novel today, because it is also part of an open and frank resistance against the hegemony of the dominant classes. It is healthy, then.

Oral history allows for the establishment of a constant link between phenomenology, Marxism, and hermeneutics. Through this link, it is possible to understand how the structural has repercussions on human beings, on the daily lives of collectives. It is possible to understand how workers are affected by the social processes of their era, a capitalist era in which reified relations are instituted, an era in which what is valuable is only that which reproduces the dynamics of production and consumption, putting aside human qualities to turn everyone into production gears.

People express themselves through language and words, which represent the symbols and meanings that they have built throughout their life experience. However, these experiences happen within a society that seeks to implant certain kinds of consciousness and ideas. People express their immediate reality through discourse, From the sensible concreteness of the oral account, researchers then elaborate a philosophical-epistemological reflection to approach the concrete totality, the concreteness of what is thought. The researcher then carries out a second order reinterpretation⁹. This reflection allows for the realization that the person interviewed is not alone; they share a condition with their peers, that is, with a whole social class that is being exploited.

In this research, oral history made it possible to unravel the stage of elaboration of an empirical consciousness, in which a class psychology is located. It is situated precisely in what some call everyday life, the world of pseudo-concretion; in short, that of everyday praxis, of utilitarian praxis⁶.

The question of health in those who resist

The life stories of the education workers in resistance constitute the essence of this research and reflection. It is through them that we can understand their journeys, the various ways in which they have been determined by their social environment, education, culture, and life experiences. The meanings they give to their experiences, to their own history, are largely shared with their comrades in struggle, and the processes through which they shape their own identities and ways of relating are also common to many who share their working conditions, cultural space, situations, experiences, and meanings.

The interviews give an account of the details of their lives, their existential proceedings within the work environment, and their situation as social fighters. As early as their childhood memories, to their current behavior, work is part of their very essence and, in a very relevant way, the defense of it has transformed them into who they are now.

The narratives were collected at an important historical moment, right after the earthquake that shook Oaxaca, and especially Ciudad Ixtepec, in September 2017. Amid a city in recovery, with people living in the streets because they lost their homes. Under a PRI government that robbed them of international aid that should have been destined for the reconstruction of homes, schools, and hospitals. The only people who recovered were the military; they, with astonishing speed, put up barracks, apartments, and offices, amidst a desolation that made more than evident the inequality in the distribution of resources.

Education workers are united by organized social resistance and the tragedies that come with being in the struggle, but also the enormous joy of being an active part of the defense of their work, of that which gives them joy and pride. A world of meanings that also find testimony in their bodies, which emerge in the form of symptoms, of ailments, but also of energy and hope, of strength and wellbeing; all at the same time, within their health-disease processes.

To analyze the information collected, an in-depth review of the interviews conducted with two education workers was carried out, as well as the description of each of them. The testimonies collected in 2017 were carried out under their informed consent and through recorded

conversations in which they were asked to narrate their own life stories. Aidé, a female education worker born in the year 1960; and Jaguar, born in 1956, a teacher who at the time of the interview was enjoying his first year of retirement.

Health

The working class knows, because it is structured within them, that to survive they must sell their labor power. They must carry out an activity that provides them with enough to clothe themselves, to have a roof over their heads, to eat, and to heal when they get sick, both for themselves and for their families. This is the most important thing in the life of every proletarian, and it predisposes them to act in the face of anything that prevents them from doing so. If there is no work, their life could be gone.

The two stories, that of Aidé, who has openly expressed her resistance against the oppressive system, and that of Jaguar, who refuses to be part of the teachers' struggle, share the expression of incoherence and rational inconsistencies that are presented as consistent; they are the reflection of a highly contradictory and harmful mode of production, but from which it is not possible to abstract themselves.

What happens in the interviews of both workers, from the way in which social resistance is organized in their context, is an expression of many contradictions that are established within their subjectivity. Aidé and Jaguar have a consciousness that arises from the material conditions of their existence and another, a false consciousness dictated and manipulated from within the ideology of the dominant class.

Health-illness is not approached in a fragmented way. It is a structural and structuring issue, which is determined by a social complex that has at its base the capitalist mode of production. Immersed in the narrative of their histories, those of Aidé and Jaguar, we can see there is a totality that accounts for all the processes that determine them. Through their subjectivity we can know how the process of resistance affects the psychic and physiological structure and their health in a permanent way, always linked to that totality.

In both workers is present the experience of the reproduction of capital. Aidé and Jaguar are witnesses of the changes taking place in the

working class, since the scheme of neoliberalism has enforced social practices of dispossession.

Both express the deterioration of the living and working conditions to which they are subjected. At the macro level, they know that their current experience is due to decades of economic crises, in which big capital seeks to resolve its wealth by increasing productivity and cutting costs, which leads to the replacement of workers by automated processes or wage reduction and increased hours.

Aidé has resolved that this casualization of working conditions is, in effect, making workers sick, and is actively seeking a solution to the issue. She has decided to confront the privatizing forms of education and neoliberalism in general, so that the next generations will have better conditions. Her life experience in the collective has reaffirmed and built an awareness of what surrounds her. She knows that the teachers' struggle makes sense and critically reflects on the failures, advantages, and drawbacks of collective organization. She has taken initiatives on a personal level, forming a civil association, without leaving aside the issues she shares with her colleagues. Her existential condition is related to an urgency and to the goal of leaving the world better than she found it.

Jaguar is an example of how the capitalist mode of production, which enforces very strict and strenuous forms of work organization, gives rise to chronic degenerative diseases. Jaguar does not link his diabetic condition with the stress caused by a life of tireless work. In his case, there is no break with the dominant ideology, as the experience of intense and tireless work is lived as a source of pride and the real executioner, the Mexican educational system, is hidden from him. Despite having the possibility to fight or, at least, to take advantage of the opportunity of the teachers' strikes to rest, the imposed idea of the "good, perfect, ideal worker" remains engraved in Jaguar. For him, there is no critical questioning between what society demands him to be and what he really is. He unhesitatingly chooses sacrifice, decides to be the perfect slave, in the words of Scott³, making the conscious choice to cover up and dissimulate nonconformity. He alienated himself by constructing values that eventually robbed him of friendships and health.

Jaguar comes from a rural environment. His transition to the city to study, having an

indigenous phenotype, in addition to a covert homosexual preference, was not easy. It forced him to construct an urban identity on top of another, the rural one. The values abandoned to acquire those of a world that seeks only to produce were subsumed and did not return, even though he ended up living and working in the town where he was born. It is as if he sought to reaffirm himself towards the people of Ixtepec as a foreigner, without consciously accepting it.

For her part, Aidé lives her own contradictions and her inevitable immersion in capitalism in two profound ways. She begins to live a form of expressed resistance, but without the development of a prefigurative praxis, which deprives her supposedly revolutionary politics of sustenance and realism. Her form of resistance became superstructural, as she ended up appealing to the representation of leaders, to specialization, to management, to leadership, to the "practical politicization" of which Sánchez Vázquez¹⁰ speaks, and to the generation of government officials. In other words, practical action was reduced to a dispute over spaces of power within the frameworks instituted by the very system that she seeks to change. It is evident that Aidé conceives social change as a suppression of the dominant stratum and not as the construction of a radically different society. Her political vision is statist and, thus, her vision of social change is centered on the impulsion of the State and on the intermediate, purely governmental connections. What is promoted from this left is another form of politicization, not another politics.

Without the development of a true critical consciousness and a collective politicization; without the anchorage provided by a culture, understood as a whole development of symbolic horizons, to create an emancipatory sense; without the creation of an "us"; without the recognition of the legitimizing function of consciousness; without the conviction that the subalterns can be "leaders", that is to say, without the development of a "consciousness of government" in the subaltern classes, prefigurative praxis is only potential and therefore abstract. Without critical thinking, practical action can end up institutionalized, absorbed by the system. In other words, what is at stake is the self-determination of the proletarian class at all levels; without critical consciousness

and collective politicization there is no meaning or project, popular memory becomes fruitless. The popular subject (which is wide, deep and diverse) is restricted in its capacity to produce emancipatory subjectivity.

Now, it has been previously expressed that all human beings are dialectic, which means that we are reactive to the situations and experiences we live. There is resistance in every situation that represents obedience. This resistance is consistent with our determination, with our personal biography, our culture, the identity we show and the one we possess, and our gender. That is why the way in which we resolve the domination of the outside world has many forms. The way in which people resist defines their health-illness processes.

Scott³ states that people who remain silent, who keep their desire for disobedience inside, end up concealing conflicts, masking them behind a criterion of "normality". And all over the world we are beginning to live a "normality" full of injustices and outrages, which contributes to our social decomposition, and to a distorted, contradictory, and superficial morality.

That which we silence, that which deprive of language, of expression, finds its way out in another way: in the form of symptom, of illness. That which we manage to express, which manifests itself by articulating itself through language, has an oppositional origin and acts as an initial emancipating force, achieving a sensation of wellbeing, the final goal of which is sublimation¹¹.

In Aidé's narrative, an eagerness for collective organization and organized resistance is expressed. Her story contains a constant element of disobedience, which she resolves through class consciousness and the union with her comrades, against the dispossession, the loss of rights, the undermining of health, and the precariousness of working conditions. She expresses that the act of protest and of struggle keeps her alive.

Jaguar, on the other hand, has been marked by his life history, adopting instead a condition of silent resistance. Since his childhood he experienced violence and the stigma of social class, and of the prevailing machismo in the culture in which he lived. Jaguar cannot openly express his homosexuality and his dissatisfaction with his father, a figure who was violent to him and is now under his care. His loneliness and antisocial

tendencies find relief in the activity that sustains him: his work. It is this that he must defend to the death because it is the only thing that he feels he has left. When it comes to the loss of his job, resistance begins to take an overt form, only that, contrary to the case of Aidé, the manifestation of his resistance is individual, egocentric. Jaguar's hard, serious face transforms when he recalls his disobedience against the union, and his voice becomes louder when he compares himself to those who stop working to go on strike. Within his subjectivity, he has the best values because he never stops working, defining himself as an "apostle of education". Even within his alienated behavior, resistance is a source of health, although his path does not seek class consciousness (his own and that of others), that is, to make everyone healthy.

Health is symbolically inscribed in human existence in the same way that perception is determined by social and historical context. Aidé and Jaguar both have illnesses that demand a reconstruction of their own normality¹² towards a new way of understanding themselves, of being balanced, of becoming "normal" again. While Jaguar manifests in his speech his loneliness, at the same time concealing a deep sadness, Aidé jovially expresses the existential changes that have been transforming her. She keeps learning and moving constantly; he remains static, choosing a conservative and apolitical life. Both consider themselves healthy and both, also, feel good about their way of resisting. Both have been teachers' fighters and have actively defended the public educators' union from the dispossession implied by neoliberal policies. Both have been beaten physically and morally, by the federal police and by the National Union of Education Workers (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación). Sergio López¹³ states that emotions are articulated with the organs of the body and form a complex whole in their internal relations with other organs and other emotions. Aidé, against all odds, has defeated cancer and bravely responded to chemotherapy. To achieve that, she had to move away from what for her symbolized suffering and emotional distress. She divorced. Her body now lives the reality of remission and the sadness, the mourning, of losing a great love. She expressly says that, for her, the struggle has been the engine that gives meaning to her life. In Jaguar's case, he is only

reactive when he is directly distanced from his work. He does not understand that the changes of the PRI's educational reform will extinguish his way of teaching and privatize education, making it impossible for new teachers to form a heritage like the one he was able to form. He is alienated and, as long as he can teach, the rest is invisible. In any case, Jaguar has expressed that his space in the classroom gives him status and makes him feel at ease; filling in for the teachers who are out of work has kept his glucose levels under control and happy. Jaguar doesn't realize that his job is killing him.

There was a time in human history when selfishness, the desire for private property, and the demonstration of power and status were not the essential necessities of life. There was a time without capitalism, without accumulation of wealth. Living labor allows us to understand this from the emotional and physiological aspect; imbued in it are the vestiges of previous modes of production, which produce positive feelings. Therefore, living labor is the great mediator between health and organized social resistance.

Even Jaguar, a worker who has proudly assimilated the dominant ideology of the capitalist system, becomes reactive and resistant to the very idea of not being able to teach. Teaching is one of the oldest human jobs, with perhaps more cultural and oral baggage than any other profession, which has hardly been replaced by automation processes, and which late capitalism longs to destroy in order to undermine living labor. Teaching work contains arcane processes of previous modes of production, it is profoundly human and inevitably liberating. It is the means of transmission of education, a structural and structuring process and institution, on the same hierarchical level as health-disease. Education contains so much cultural power that teaching itself becomes a kind of bastion against the contradictions of capital. Authors such as Paulo Freire¹⁴ and Henry Giroux¹⁵ have even expressed that public education can never be finished, because for that to happen, human beings would have to be finished.

The difference between the state of health-illness of Aidé and Jaguar is mediated, then, by this living work. And, as mentioned above, resistance operates differently in both cases. Jaguar represents one of the terrible successes of the capitalist structure: an isolated and egocentric resistance

promoted by a classist ideology. Jaguar's mechanisms for resisting domination are fragmented and unable to transcend his own individuality. He is only activated when his immediate working life is threatened. On the other hand, Aidé is a woman who actively participated in the revolutionary events of the 1970's. Her biography is by the social organization of those great student and university collectives. She tends towards social organization in resistance, towards resistance and action, and towards participation, guided by class consciousness. She expresses an interest in knowing all the social relationships that she can find in the particular form of dispossession that determines her current conditions of struggle. She is never alone, always ready to help and be helped.

Departing from Ernst Cassirer's premise¹⁶, this research proposes that what people think, perceive, symbolize, and mean about the events that occur in the world around them, can be healthy if they are inscribed in a process of organized social resistance. For this reason, it is vital to foster critical thinking and a politicized social structure. The understanding and development of prefigurative praxis is essential, in which utopia is attainable because it can be dreamed of, which can apprehend what is lost when the great monster capital ruthlessly decides to dispossess land, rights, food, freedom, philosophy, etc., from our people: the proletariat.

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