

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Social Pandemic of COVID-19 in Latin America. Reflections from Collective Health\*

*Edgar C. Jarillo Soto, PhD*

---

This is a collective book that can be read fluently in one sitting or by its independent chapters, according to the interests and preferences of the reader; in both cases, there is no possible loss. The prose is understandable and easily interpretable whether one has a background in Collective Health or if it is a first approach to this theoretical perspective. Of the 16 authors, six are graduates of the Doctorate in Collective Health Sciences of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), Unidad Xochimilco, and those who do not come from this doctorate share this perspective, expressed in their chapters through the conceptual, ethical and political characteristics of this posture of thought: an interpretation grounded on the social sciences, a political vision of action and intervention, and an ethical positioning of commitment with the subordinate social sectors and groups, those most affected by the development of capital with greater affectations by social inequity, especially in the neoliberal phase of capitalism.

---

**Edgar C. Jarillo Soto** PhD, Sociology.  
Professor, Master in Social Medicine and Doctorate in Collective Health Sciences, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Xochimilco.  
E-mail: [jsec6322@correo.xoc.uam.mx](mailto:jsec6322@correo.xoc.uam.mx)

\*Camila Pereira Abagaro, Martín Boy, Roselia Arminda Rosales Flores, Javier Marmolejo and Carmen Muñoz Muñoz, *La pandemia social de COVID-19 en América Latina. Reflexiones desde la Salud Colectiva*, Editorial Teseo, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

**Download:**  
<https://www.editorialteseo.com/archivos/19170/la-pandemia-social-de-covid-19-en-america-latina/>

**Online reading:**  
<https://www.teseopress.com/pandemiasocial/>

**Received:** March 15, 2021.  
**Accepted:** April 30, 2021.  
**Conflict of interest:** none.



### LA PANDEMIA SOCIAL DE COVID-19 EN AMÉRICA LATINA

Reflexiones desde la Salud Colectiva

CAMILA PEREIRA ABAGARO  
MARTÍN BOY  
ROSELIA ARMINDA ROSALES FLORES  
JAVIER MARMOLEJO  
CARMEN MUÑOZ MUÑOZ  
(COORDINADORES)

teseo

The book is structured as a preface, followed by an initial chapter and three sections with three chapters each. The preface was written by Oliva López Arellano, a pillar of the postgraduate program from which those trained in collective health in Mexico come from (she is also the current Secretary of Health of the Mexico City Government), she situates the topic of COVID-19 in a conjunctural and historical perspective from the angle of collective health; in addition to synthesizing the approaches and contributions of each chapter. It is a significant text in itself with considerations where the theory is articulated with the reality of the Latin American context, leaving some valuable reflections open and many others with possible derivations from what is pointed out.

The following are collective opening words. A chapter of invitation to reading it as intellectual reflection, the emergence of the book took place in the midst of the pandemic when the authors first met in a virtual space, an unmistakable sign of the mitigation measures forced upon us by the pandemic, to share

experiences, thoughts and observations that gave rise to a systematized reflective ordering in topics specific to the concerns of each one and the contrasting of the situations in different countries of the continent. The national roots of each author allowed direct testimonies of the daily circumstance, modulated by a careful observation and structured reflection, turning the experienced reality into a valuable intellectual product: this book.

This initial chapter also lays down, in a tight synthesis, the fundamental pillars on which the theoretical substratum of the approaches in each chapter are built upon. It is a dense space where the foundations of collective health are laid down and the contributions of the social character of the health-illness-process approach, as the cornerstone of this field of science, are clearly set. This constitutes an explicit recognition for the foundational approach of Cristina Laurell, who has been an inevitable reference since the early years of social medicine and collective health in Latin America and the world, an illustrious first-class teacher for many of us, and a pervasive presence even for recent generations trained in the field of social medicine-collective health. This first chapter ends with the systematized enumeration, from the point of view of the book's coordinators, of the contents of each of the following chapters. It is a road map that synthetically exposes the problem-topic, the approach, and highlights the main contributions contained in each of the following nine chapters.

This is followed by a collective chapter entitled Impacts of COVID-19 in Latin America: Dissimilar Health Policies, Disparate Results. The situation in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico is the opening of the subject, with the processes experienced as of November 2020 and what is still ongoing. In this chapter, the authors manage to dimension the pandemic in its expressions, technical and political decisions in the countries of reference, beyond the abundant, detailed and often decontextualized epidemiological considerations. It constitutes an overview of the mosaic of technical and public management decisions made by the national, regional and local governments of the different countries as a result of the implementation of social and health policies. It does not constitute an assessment of the

consequences and impacts because that would be premature; however, they manage to elucidate the variations derived from the social and political circumstances of each country, thus constituting evidence of the structural conditions prevailing in each national reality prior to the pandemic, which are the substratum to understanding the health conditions of these populations and the deterioration of their health systems. By evidencing this confluence, they manage to explain the structural contradictions in the way of facing the pandemic, a fundamental contribution because they put into scale the figures used for the equal comparison, even with their necessary statistical standardizations, between countries of the World, those of the American region and Latin America in particular.

Subsequently, the book is structured thematically into three sections with three chapters each. The first section, entitled The Challenges of the Health Crisis and the Right to Health, contains chapters that rigorously present perspectives on the right to health, public policies and the conformation of Health Systems. Each of these three chapters provides concrete elements to understand COVID-19 as a political problem, as an exercise of public power exercised through State instances and its implications for health as a right, its exercise and guarantees. The authors of the chapter Health and Politics: the Covid-19 Pandemic and Politics, Notes for a Debate, shows the tensions in Brazil in face of the pandemic from within the Unified Health System while having the federal government policies positioned against it. Then the chapter: Radicalizing the Social Right to Health in Response to the Social Determinants for COVID-19 in Mexico, has a perspective focused on some contradictions between the socio-historical understanding of the pandemic and the institutional capacity to respond to it. And finally, the third chapter of this section: Some Keys in the Recovery of the State in Times of COVID-19 in Mexico: Thinking Health in Terms of Rights, where the author raises a very interesting reflection to reconfigure the analysis of health as a right, its recognition and enforceability in the framework of the contemporary State.

The second section is entitled: The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Workers' Health. The three chapters that compose it address

aspects related to the health of workers with emphasis on the meaning of digital work, which was already a reality prior to the pandemic and its mitigation measures, but particularly so after the confinement reached unsuspected dimensions, with multiple challenges for those who perform it, configuring new conceptual needs to interpret its legal, political and health implications due to the type of hiring, the variety of work activities, the inequities and unequal consequences by gender and some other topics of great interest. The chapter Elements on the Situation of the Working Class in the COVID-19 Pandemic: The "Outbreak" of Digital Labor and On-Demand Contracting, contains a rich reflection on the circumstances of the reconfiguration of the labor process in neoliberal capitalist production and the way the pandemic exacerbates and shows more starkly the disadvantages of labor relations among those who not only continue on their jobs in the midst of the pandemic, but now extend that form of production to many more workers previously excluded from those rapacious labor relations, expanding the universe of working people under precarious working conditions. The following chapter Recognizing Covid-19 as an Occupational Illness in Brazil: to Be or not to Be, that is the Question, provides an example, in the case of Brazil, of the dispute in the economic and legal field to situate COVID-19 as an occupational disease, especially for those who work in the essential services sector that during the pandemic have continued with their activities. The author also reflexively approaches work at home, telecommuting or some of the other denominations that have arisen, linked to gender and triple workday affecting mainly women. The third chapter of this section is entitled The Work that Never Ends: Women, Domestic Work and Telework in the COVID-19 Pandemic. Here, the authors approach an aspect of the pandemic, which although has been pointed out, still has yet to be much explored, from the gender perspective in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third section: The Cost of the Pandemic on People's Lives: Everyday Life at Risk, contains works that address the subjectivities and the experiences of the general population during the pandemic. The chapter The City in Times of COVID-19: The Reconfiguration of the

Public and Private Spheres, elaborates on the dimensions of urban space and its reconfiguration for the control of the pandemic. It is motivating to read this chapter because it contextualizes current events in the perspective of urban processes during pandemics in human history, by analyzing the reconfiguration of public and private space in the city of Buenos Aires as a result of the pandemic, references to the categories of power, class and gender, are once again the expression of collective health referents in concrete situations, endowing them with interpretative richness.

The following chapter Reflections on Social Stigmatization, Misinformation and COVID-19 in Mexico, addresses a relevant topic with incipient works of empirical basis or conceptual potential. From the category of stigma, articulating it with social determination, the author raises elements of the social construction of subjectivity, mobilized from multiple points of reference during the pandemic, it focuses on the immediate consequences of the "infodemia" and disinformation to assign a use of COVID-19 as stigma, becoming a "new metaphor of the disease: the fear of being infected" with specific reference to experiences at a hospital in a suburban area of Mexico City, the product of an interpretation generated in the mass media for profit. The last chapter of the section and of the book Survival in Old Age in Chile: what the Pandemic Shows about Social Protection, weaves an analysis where the historicity of social protection in Chile is expressed, and with it, the circumstances of change explained by the social processes of the country, and the way to face them within the neoliberal scheme and its pre-existing circumstances of vulnerability, especially for the older population.

This text is a confirmation of Collective Health as a theoretical resource to a critically approached knowledge of the processes of health, disease and care, with distance from the clinical, epidemiological and even social approaches centered on the perspective of the biological, the functioning, even if dynamic, of physiology; all of them ultimately centered on the perspective of the organic dimension. In contrast, this book tries to make the analysis more complex, not for the sake of doing so, but because of the ontological and epistemological necessity of the object of study itself, in order to situate the pandemic, not only

attributable to the existence of a virus, but as a social problem with causes and consequences on society and its members, a product of the forms of economic, political and cultural organization existing in our concrete societies. The organic and biological level is incorporated, recognizing its existence, but the emphasis of the critical and questioning look is precisely the contribution by providing the enriching, systematic and incisive perspective of a health problem in its social dimension.

The diverse spaces with concrete particularities where health-disease-care phenomena are observed in relation to COVID-19 cannot be reduced to "contexts" where general references of a set of real situations are superimposed without order or concert to insist on the explanations of the organic dimensions of the cause of the disease, its effects on individuals, groups or society, with an epidemiological content. On the contrary, in each chapter of the book an approach from the social determination is achieved in a very clear way to articulate the structural processes, macro if you will, in the specific interpretation of the analysis of expressions of some of the facets of the epidemic due to its social character.

It is quite relevant to highlight the confluence of people involved in coordinating this book and each one of its chapters, beyond the individual or shared work of writing, because in the voice of those who coordinated the book "... with different educational backgrounds ... though invitations that stemmed from critical, working and political convergences. The social determination of health, the understanding the pre-existing inequalities to COVID-19..." is the result of a juncture in systematic work, had there not been a continuous reflection and problematizing thought, it would have remained a momentary intellectual explosion without becoming a book; the keen eye and critical sense of all those who participated in the book have transformed it into a legacy for the future, from the coordinated creation of a still frame at the time of writing. The opportunity will come to look back at the situation

and reconfigure, and even modify, if necessary, the approaches and trace other routes of greater richness to what is presented today. For now, the pandemic is placed "...as a paradigm of analysis..." where conceptual categories at the center of collective health such as the social character of the health-disease-care process, the economic and social codetermination, totality and historicity acquire the status of reality, because they account for the conjuncture and because they put into perspective the social reality of our countries.

The central categories of collective health have been set to operate and act from their structural character in the social production of material, cultural, political, social and symbolic goods; the distribution and differential appropriation of goods and services; the economic, political and social inequalities, at the center of the inequity of the neoliberal society formed in the last 30 years; they are combined with recent contributions to understand the specificities of objects of analysis such as: gender, stigma, law, health systems, amongst others. Thus, we have enriched and dynamic views that, without moving away from social determination, do incorporate actuality and flexibility to their understanding. In all cases their politicization is evident through the social transformations taking place to face different forms, inequitable, of getting sick and dying at any time, before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

I appeal to the comprehension of the readers for leaving a record of my pride and happiness for reading my former students of the Doctorate in Collective Health Sciences of the UAM-Xochimilco, in Mexico, together with the other authors who, without being such, I adopt, because they are exponents of the replacement generation in Collective Health in Latin America. They are proof of our historical effort in an educational institution to build a space for the understanding and transformation of the social, political and health reality of our countries and thus contribute to the better existence of humanity as a whole.

