

# The voice of the voiceless: critical analysis of the production and interpretation of testimonies in social sciences a Latin American perspective

## Abstract

This article analyses the validity conditions of “testimony” as a methodological tool in Latin American social sciences. The principal advantage of testimony is that it enables the construction of research and analysis of subjectivity, particularly with popular sectors. This has facilitated the incorporation of their discourses and representations into the social sciences. Notwithstanding, this incorporation has occurred within a highly empiricist perspective, whereby testimony is an immediate representation of the individual. The mediation of the social scientist, which is particularly significant in interviews, remains hidden. The concept of testimony, therefore, as the “voice of the voiceless” disguises the dialogue between the researcher and the individual. This dialogue could be further developed as an instrument of hermeneutical research, whereby the researcher no longer monopolizes interpretations.

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## Introduction

Since the 1980's, there has been a growing interest in the use of life stories and histories, autobiographies and testimonies in Latin American social sciences. This has resulted in the production of research work based upon this type of methodology and, in many cases, of autobiographical stories about people coming from subordinated sectors. Simultaneously, a theoretical and methodological debate has been emerging about the possibilities and restrictions of these forms of research.<sup>1-4</sup> In this article we hope to contribute to this debate from a critical standpoint. When speaking of critique, we do it in the original sense it has according to Kant. To Kant, the critique of reason implies overcoming both the naive dogmatism as well as that of skeptics. It supposes the double surmounting of both stances. In turn, it seeks to show the potentialities and the restrictions of reason. In this case, we seek to dispute an empiricist conception of testimonies as well as a skeptical vision that denies all value and also shows the restrictions of this form of knowledge of social reality.<sup>1,5</sup> At a more general theoretical/methodological level, we attempt to contribute to overcoming the dichotomy between subjectivism – objectivism in the social theory.

In this case, the proposed critique tries to be imminent critique, that is, one which “employs conceptual instruments of its object”<sup>6</sup>; therefore, some of the assumptions of defendants of the use of testimonies, show that they are contradicted with the procedures employed in this type of studies. In the first section of this paper, we will attempt to show those elements that in our view shed more light on testimony, relating them to transformations which have facilitated the emergence of a greater interest in social research. Here we will make special reference to the study of popular women in Chile. In the second section, we will be more interested in making a critical analysis in the sense outlined above. We will analyze the mayor conditions necessary for the production of testimonies in social sciences, so as to show the presence of the researcher as co-author of the testimony and not only as a collector. In this way, we will dispute the empiricist

<sup>1</sup>Similarly, Giddens talks about a “positive critique” of interpretative sociologies, which “is a sympathetic or constructive one”.<sup>5</sup>

notion of testimony as an immediate representation of the meanings, ways of conceiving the world and the experience of subjects, particularly those coming from the subordinated sectors. A debate was raised over what constitutes one of the central assumptions of the authors and defenders of testimonial literature: the claim of being a non-mediated expression of subjects. In this debate, we can confirm a great influence of post-modern and post-structuralist conceptions, although other traditional theoretical and philosophical perspectives like Marxism are perceived.<sup>2,7</sup> Also theoretical problems of a different nature are discussed, such as the representation of subalternity, which vigorously emerged with the works of Spivak and Babha on post-colonial discourse.<sup>3,8-11</sup> It would be highly interesting to examine the importance of those perspectives and arguments which are at stake in this debate over the testimony.<sup>12</sup> However; this would far exceed the scope of an article like this one and our academic competence.

On the contrary, we have considered a relatively modest goal that would allow a contribution to this debate, related with the methodological question on how testimonies are produced within the domain of the social sciences.<sup>4,5,13,14</sup> We find this pertinent, because

<sup>2</sup>See articles published in book edited by Beverly and Achugar, *La Voz del Otro*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>In Spanish, one can consult the compilation of books on subalternity by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Rossana Barragán, where contributions by R. Guha, G. Pandey, S. Amin, P. Catterjee, D. Chakrabarty, G. Spivak, and V. Daas y G. Prakash are included.<sup>8</sup> For a receptive vision of the Bhabha categories concerning Latin America, see.<sup>9</sup> One should also consider examining the critiques made of these authors within the contemporary debate. I highlight here the criticism made by Ahmad<sup>10</sup> of Spivak and Bhabha concerning “postcoloniality”, as well as that made by Kanesfsky<sup>11</sup> of “the postmodernist idea of history as mere narrative construction”. Far from assuming a retrieval of the marginal visions on history, this would mean a “delegitimation of all the voices” by relativizing the historical truth, disarticulating also the sense of community in minority groups, which would not be exclusively linked to, or would be necessarily imposed by a dominant center.

<sup>4</sup>When saying methodology, I refer not to the techniques of research and empirical contrast, as it is commonly understood, but the production conditions of the object of study, which as Adorno<sup>13</sup>, Giddens<sup>5</sup>, Marx<sup>14</sup> and other critics

implies placing the process of creating the testimony under debate, rather than considering it an original result, the text itself, as it has been done commonly<sup>5</sup> Thus we propose a more methodological emphasis rather than a narrative one. Likewise, this debate over testimony has not sufficiently considered the growing importance of social scientists in the making of books and works where testimonies of various social subjects are produced and, in some cases, interpreted. For this reason, our analysis will be limited to social sciences and will claim validity only within this domain. Nevertheless, we believe it is worth pointing out at least some coincidences regarding some studies of literary critique. We have even taken some central notions of a prominent figure in this discipline, Jean Franco. We do not ignore that, in the case of the testimony, the frontiers between literature and the social sciences are very subtle, without being non-existent. In any case, we consider this type of analysis a complement of that undertaken in literary theory and critique, without mentioning cultural studies, last delimitation is geographical and thematic. We will focus on the case of Chile, about which we have rather extensive materials and information and on popular women, not only because they represented one of the major preoccupations of this type of studies, but also because they show a more general problem, which is the representation of the dominated groups in social sciences. Therefore, in general terms, what has been said about testimonies of Chilean women is valid for other cases, such as the indigenous people, the peasants, the workers, etc. Testimonies of women consider, to some extent, these forms of subordination, as long as the dimension of gender is over-determinate by other dimensions: social class, social status, age group, etc.<sup>6,15,16</sup>

### Testimonies: the reasons for their retrieval and their potentialities

As we mentioned earlier, since the 1980's the testimonies have been used as a habitual recourse in social sciences in Chile and other Latin American countries. Although the studies have covered a wide variety of themes, there are certain recurrent issues. One of them has been the status of women, regardless of their condition or origin: women from low social classes<sup>17-19</sup> female peasants,<sup>20-23</sup> and mapuche women.<sup>24-30</sup> Also preferential attention has been paid to the issue of culture and/or peasants world vision.<sup>31,32</sup>

Some of the forms of presenting and analyzing accounts followed those traditionally employed in anthropological and sociological works, other, on the contrary, adhered to those norms to a lesser degree and were rejected by many researchers in larger or small

of the sociological empiricism have pointed out, is not an object given in reality, but constructed by the researcher.

<sup>5</sup>Yet, this question of authority and its process has been treated extensively in the case of Menchu and Burgos in the so called Rigoberta Menchú controversy.

<sup>6</sup>On this issue, there is abundant bibliography. The problem has been highlighted by Montecino<sup>15</sup> "The relationships of gender would also be signaled by social class, ethnic group, age and the social and historical context where they are harbored". In this same sense, Toledo<sup>16</sup> makes an interesting criticism of the reduction of women to a "substantive identity", separated from other identities: "their identities are restricted to a single one, the one of gender and this is limited to a universal, not to a historical symbolic and social construction". Less interesting seems the proposition of both authors for associating this multiplicity and diversity of identities with our "crossbred (mestiza) and colonized condition"<sup>15</sup> or with a "mestizaje of disciplines" according to the "mestizaje of cultures".<sup>16</sup> In the former case, the originally recognized multiplicity is somehow negated by the double label "cross-bred" and "colonial"; in the latter, the intention is to place different disciplines, theories and concepts on a same plane in an empiricist manner.

measures. As far as we know, the reasons for this rejection have not been systematically presented, which undoubtedly diminishes their validity. However, we consider that the critique of this research perspective is an indispensable requisite for assessing the potentialities in the production and use of testimonies in social sciences. This paper is intended to make a contribution to this work and at the sometime outline a possible alternative to the difficulties arisen.<sup>33,34</sup> We think there are three factors that allow us to account for the reevaluation of testimonies in social sciences, especially the testimonies of women from low social classes. In the first place, in social sciences there has been a re-emergence of forms of qualitative research, such as life histories, oral history, etc., which had been pushed aside by the development of quantitative research techniques and the predominance of a positivist conception of the former.<sup>35,36</sup> Life histories, for example, went through a number of criticisms which questioned their scientific usefulness during the 1930's. Samuel Stouffer, one of the promoters of the survey research method came up with relevant questions and doubts. Stouffer considered this method far superior to the life histories since it allowed us "to obtain the same specific information but at a lower cost".<sup>7,37</sup> It was at this time that a modification of the meaning of the term "social survey" came into existence. Until then, field studies of living conditions of particular social groups, especially popular urban sectors, had been referred to as "social survey". These studies "revealed and described customs and institutions as well as opinions".<sup>38</sup> Through the development of "quantitative methods more effective in the analysis of social data", the study of political opinions or of another sort, was later referred to as "survey" including consumers' preferences through interviews with previously framed questions and individuals chosen with statistical methods.

The crisis of objectivist methods and approaches in the social sciences has resulted in the retrieval of these and other similar research techniques, although the way in which they are used nowadays, the theoretical and epistemological perspectives, as well as the types of analyses, have been modified since then. It is admitted, for example, that "oral history is as old as history itself".<sup>39</sup> However, the characteristics that oral history has today are the result of recent developments. As you must remember, the pioneer experiences in this field started in the United States, when Allan Nevins established the Oral Research Office in Columbia University in 1948, time in which the positivist approaches prevailed within such institution and, in general, within American academic circles.<sup>40,41</sup> Besides the efforts of Nevins and his team, later came African Anthropologists and historians, among which stood out Jan Vansina, author of important works on the issue.<sup>42,43</sup> The growing boom and worldwide dissemination of the oral history began only in the 1960's.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Latin American,

<sup>7</sup>It is important to consider here the historical context. Stouffer was part of Bureau of Applied Research at the Columbia University where Robert K. Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld also participated and whose development was in great measure due to the Second World War, period in which many projects were entrusted to the Ministry of Defense. The most important and well-known was The American Soldier, 4 volumes edited by Stouffer between 1940 and 1950.<sup>37</sup> This led to a confrontation with the School of Chicago; a determinate supporter of ethnography and life histories. According to Pollack, "In this battle for the search of scientific legitimacy, the sociology of the School of Chicago showed several disadvantages if compared with the sociology of the survey research. At the same time as such school resorted to frequently qualitative observation techniques, it was reproached for illustrating rather than proving, or describing, while the quantitative techniques were intended to predict. In the name of the efficacy, the utility and scientificity (thanks to quantitation and mathematization) the advantage finally fell over the new School of Columbia" [Ibid: 61].

its development has been slower than in countries from the Northern Hemisphere, starting in the 1970's.<sup>45</sup>

In the second place, this interest in testimonies, autobiographies, etc. has not been caused only by the transformations in social sciences. The political, social and economic conditions of the contemporary world have also had a decisive influence. This may be more or less evident in the case of Chile and other Latin American countries affected by profound transformations since the 1970's. The need for knowing such changes led many social scientists in the region into seeking "methods of analysis exceeding the boundaries of exclusively structural and objectivist sociology and that recognized the importance of the subjective dimension of society".<sup>46</sup> Interest was also aroused in daily life, profoundly affected by the abovementioned changes. However, it doesn't immediately follow a major concern over the problems and perspectives of a given social subject, as it is the case of Chilean female peasants. Ximena Valdes writes: "It's hard to find a page, a phrase dedicated to women in the numerous studies undertaken in the 1960's and early 1970's".<sup>43</sup> Valdés goes on: "During the years when Chilean society and particularly rural areas were struck by the Agrarian Reform, numerous studies about rural workers were undertaken. However, women were not at that time considered a focal point". During the period of the Neoliberal Agrarian Reform, there was indeed a concern over the situation of female peasants. For example, their contribution to peasant economy was studied.<sup>47,48</sup> It is obvious that, although in those years the productive contribution of female peasants to the family group increased, they have always participated in production.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the occurrence of particular social processes is not sufficient guarantee for these to become a preferential object of scientific research and draw the attention of society as a whole. There is a third factor that must be cleared up in order to account for this "encounter" between testimony and women. It relates to the development of the critical conscience about the condition of women in our society and the relationships and identities of gender. It is a complex phenomenon that has reached great development in the recent past and which has resulted in different initiatives and practices women's movements and lines of research.<sup>8,49</sup>

This cognitive interest has been distinctively expressed by different researchers. Kirai de León writes: "As professionals we choose to dedicate ourselves to the issue of women because we consider that subordination in common to all of us, but, additionally, in the work we do, we find that it is our own experience of subordination which gives us of most of the time the intuitions and answers that we are trying to find. By analyzing in a complex way, the lives of other women we turn to the instruments and the commitment that we come up with as a response to an ideology which determines our lives and the lives of the authors in this text".<sup>20</sup> Lastly, we must make reference to the fact that this interest in testimonies has, in the case of women, relationship with the retrieval that many researchers are undertaking of female literature. This has motivated them to retrieve the works of colonial writers, which, in most case, were not published or disseminated at the time they were produced.<sup>49</sup> But it also stimulated the production of new works, some of which become classics of this genre, such as the autobiography of Rigoberta Menchú.<sup>50</sup>

### About the conditions in the production of testimonies

Now we will analyze the conditions in the production of

<sup>8</sup>In this latter case, I refer, above all to the studies on women and gender studies.

testimonies, specifically the "interview situation"<sup>51</sup> and the "composition" of the accounts.<sup>52</sup> The explication of these two elements will allow us to show that testimonies are not a spontaneous reflection of popular representations but rather a common production between the researcher and the subject under study.<sup>9,53-55</sup> We will call "testimony" to the account in which a "subject shares his experience with someone else".<sup>56</sup> It is a type of account in which a "witness speaks in order to respond to an implicit interlocutor"<sup>57</sup> – or also explicit – which, in any case, presupposes some distances and a dialog from different positions intellectual/activist, foreign/Indian, written/oral form. Here we will limit ourselves to those accounts in whose collection or editing a social researcher intervenes discarding those produced and received from within a social group in an autonomous way.

According to these criteria, out of our reach are life histories. This is because in them we investigate "the biographical course of one or several subjects, for which a great quantity and diversity of materials is utilized (archives, indirect accounts, letters, historical reconstruction contracts, etc.)" without necessarily including the autobiography or life story of the subjects under study.<sup>51</sup> The life story is the one which the subject itself creates story about himself and this is clearly pointed out in our analysis. We also include a type of accounts which could be called "topical"<sup>58</sup> or thematic, where the axis of narration is one or specific events that the narrator has witnessed and which have to do with his social environment and not necessarily with "his own evolution over time".<sup>51</sup>

The ones who use testimonies tend to believe that these are a direct and not a mediated expression of the representations and ways of feeling and thinking of people, women, etc. Often a metaphor is used to illustrate this thesis: the voice of the people.<sup>10,59-61</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Piña53 rightly states that "the speaker, who generates the autobiographical discourse, and whose life the text supposedly refers to, is not the unique author; usually others intervene in its production, becoming co-authors through the role of interlocutor, interviewer, editor, analyst, etc." He adds: "these interventions reach the status of co-authorship". However, he does not analyze the conditions of this "co-authorship" and whether or not this questions the supposedly spontaneous and direct nature of the autobiographical account, which is what we seek to discuss here. On the other hand, it is highly debatable the radical separation that he establishes here and in other publications<sup>51,54</sup> between the biographical experience, the narrator's life; and his narrative elaboration, the autobiographical account. The meaning, could be said of Gadamer<sup>55</sup> is always a relationship in which the subject takes possession of past experiences, interprets them and uses then as reference to the future. What makes the autobiographical account a construction of meaning is not that it does not present the infinite totality that makes up each individual life (note also the latent methodological individualism) as Piña assumes, but precisely because through it the link between experience and the present situation occurs. And this construction, according to phenomenology, is always intentional. It has an aim; the own experience, however multiple diverse and even inappropriate it may come to be.

<sup>10</sup>I do not ignore that this expression is frequently used in other contexts, for example, in political activity. Former Chilean Senator Beltrán Urenda criticized in 1992 "some metropolis leaders" who "neither care about the voice of the people nor national harmony".<sup>59</sup> From the other extreme of the political spectrum, leader Martín Hernández appealed to "the political need for a force of the voiceless crying out loud, directly showing up".<sup>60</sup> I think it is important to point out that in the case we face the problem of appealing to the "people" as a form of legitimizing political discourse, and not in front of the production conditions of testimonies in literature and social sciences. The criticisms made in this article seek to be applicable only in this latter domain. For this reason, I leave out the philosophical and religious dimension of testimonies, dealt by Ricoeur.<sup>61</sup>



Margaret Randall writes: “the voice (of the people J.I.V.) is of utmost importance: the testimony is the transmission of that voice”.<sup>52</sup> Starting from considerations very similar to these, Ore and Rochabrun argue that the researcher “must leave in suspense his own categories, hypotheses and prejudices” to give way to those of the subjects under study.<sup>62</sup> These authors come therefore to question the *raison d'être* of social sciences: “why think that a sociological explanation would be better than the ones given by the protagonists?”. Randall, on the other hand, offers a well-shaded version of this thesis. He poses a coincidence between the “true history” and the history narrated from the perspective of the dominated classes, which corrects, according to her, the deformation of the history written from perspective of dominant classes.<sup>52</sup>

The above-mentioned arguments contain, in our view, some elements of truth. As Sergio Martinic points out: “The knowledge that helps understand and account for the facts has a dimension of power through which the social groups dispute their ways of interpreting and setting the limits for what is real, possible or, in other words, legitimate and normal”.<sup>63</sup> Such is the case of the patriarchy which presupposes “an official knowledge constructed from a male perspective which leaves women out of many dimensions of the social life. It might be interesting to develop a research perspective which incorporates the interpretations of those social groups which are not habitually considered in historical and scientific-social research of the traditional type: Indians, women, low social class people, etc; the popular wisdom, according to Martinic. However, the arguments that we are analyzing go beyond the Martinic proposal for constituting a field of study concerning the knowledge and the representations of popular sectors. These arguments, unlike Schutz and the phenomenological school in sociology, are not intended to study “commonsense” and the “social construction of reality”. For Randall and other authors sharing this stance, the issue is to try to reduce the role of the social researcher to the status of a “transmitter” (Oscar Lewis) of the representations of popular sectors expressed in testimonies.<sup>11,64,65</sup> This should imply discarding all form of questioning about the validity of such representations, since it would presuppose the use of categories external to the subjects. This corresponds to a research practice that ends in the collection, editing and publication of the testimonies, without going through an interpretation or analysis.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>It must be noted that Lewis never left out the research objectives, as some supporters of testimonies have. Besides, the methodology used in his research work combined methods of the objective type, like selection of poor communities according to level of income and type of families within them, with other subjective methods, such as interviews and ethnographic observation.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, Lewis did not incorporate into the analysis these two types of approach opting for a descriptive presentation of family life on a typical day on the premise of what he called “ethnographic realism” by analogy with “literary realism” which, however, he abandoned in his last studies. The weak theoretical argumentation on the concept of culture of poverty<sup>65</sup> contributed to this.

<sup>12</sup>Referring to oral history in Latin America, Schwarzstein says: “many of those experiences are marked by a strong empiricism. They seem to suggest that the historian dilutes becoming a mere testimony collector: in this production, we can observe a remarkable adherence to the description of isolated facts, the absence of problematical issues and the predilection for the mere transcription of the interview. Even in some of these studies, the fear of the possible paralyzing effect of methodological debates is expressed. On the other hand, not only the retrieval of the collective memory is posed but also the social function of the oral history, suggesting to change the places where one hears and speaks of not of an academic but collective knowledge”.

On the other hand, the intention is to release the researcher of the role of social activist, often mixing up the use of testimonies in social research and in a given social practice. Concerning the latter, it is true that testimonies can serve as educational or training tools. It has been verified, for example, that narrative one’s experiences has served as therapeutically device to people who have been affected by traumatic political experiences.<sup>66</sup> Testimonies have been used as instructional material for the setup of workshops for female peasants.<sup>67</sup> Their potential contributions to college teaching have been also pointed out.<sup>68</sup> Also, we can highlight their importance as a source of information about many unlawful situations concerning human right which occurred during the Chilean military regime.<sup>13</sup> These four cases reveal situations in which the collection and publication of testimonies have played a positive role in a given form of social practice. However, we feel that this does not mean neglecting knowledge objectives on the part of the researcher, even if such knowledge is intended to be critical of society. The distinction between knowledge and power maybe revised, but its identification has serious consequences for scientific research and for political practice itself. We question the supposition that testimonies are the place or forum where the dominated ones express themselves, supposition which is implicit in the thesis of Randall and Ore and Rochabrun. “Making the subordinated one talk - says Jean Franco - has been historically a strategy through which knowledge is used for establishing power”.<sup>57</sup> Franco mentions the case of the post – colonial Latin American novel, a genre based upon the exclusion of “oral discourse genres”, considered as expressions of “barbarism”. In these works “the search for personal and national identity as always incarnated by a male character, which is most of the time of the intellectual type. Thus, the novel is associated with patriarchy and subordination with the oral form”.

The clearest example of the abovementioned phenomenon would be, according to Franco, the study conducted by Oscar Lewis entitled “The children of Sánchez”. Franco remembers Lewis’s statement at the beginning of this work when he says that “for the first time the Latin American subordinated one talks. But -Franco asks herself- who actually talks? Lewis leaves out his own questions and represents himself only as a transmitter, although the book is carefully structured according to anthropological rites of passages. What guarantees the authenticity of the narration is really ‘the voice’ which supposedly has no mediation. However, this authenticity is subverted not only by the process of editing the recordings, but also –in the case of one of the daughters of Sánchez, Consuelo – by the fact that she wrote her own autobiography and contributed with essays, that later Lewis incorporated into the text without pointing out its written character”.<sup>14</sup>

Thirdly, it’s hard to accept that testimonies are a spontaneous “reflection” of the representations of subjects. The habitual way – although not the only one – of gathering the accounts is through the interview, in which the intervention of researcher- interviewer is decisive. She selects the questions and, as we know, these condition the responses. The interview is a process of social interaction in which there is a mutual adjustment of interest and expectations between

<sup>13</sup>I mention, for example, the testimony books of Sergio Bitar and Hernán Valdés about their experience as political prisoners in detention centers after the coup d’état in September, 1973.

<sup>14</sup>Despite this criticism, I find that Lewis’s studies has made a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the cultural manifestations linked to Latin American urban poverty, especially the methodology employed in his studies, which I have referred to in note 20.

the interviewer and the interviewee: “we can define the process of narration as a performance, where the observer-recorder represents the less active role – even though he stimulates and sets the course for the narrator and is the receiver of the result of the interaction” says Kirai de León.<sup>20</sup>

If the narration of testimonies were not mediated by these interventions of the researcher it would remain unchanged in front of different researchers. But, as it has been shown many times, the physical characteristics, the questions and gestures of the interviewers influence the responses of the interviewees. Therefore, it is possible to suppose that a same person will not give the same account in front of two different interviewers, which does not mean that her testimony is not reliable<sup>15,69</sup> The objectivity of the interview, as well as, the faithfulness of the testimony, cannot imply the annulment of the researcher-interviewer. It lies, on the contrary, in the definition of the situation in which the interview occurred on the part of the interviewer, in the explication of the expectations at stake and in the recording of the non-verbal gestures of the interviewee.<sup>16,70</sup> Lastly, but not least important, is keeping the questions asked by the interviewer in the editing of the testimonies.<sup>71</sup> As we will attempt to show in the conclusions this has to do not only with a methodological issue, but also with an epistemological problem concerning the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the subjects with whom her study is conducted.

Fourthly, the proposition that testimonies are the direct expression of the people’s voices does not allow for an explanation of the specific production of testimonies for their editing. It is possible that this composition of the texts may refute such thesis. It is the case of the methodology proposed by Margaret Randall, which she employs in her own work. On one occasion, she suppressed “all reference to questions of ours, even our presence as transmitters of that voice”.<sup>53</sup> On some other occasion, she employed the following technique for creating a book of testimonies: “we put away the furniture in a room and sat on the floor with tons of pages of a testimony collected during several months of work. We arranged the pages according to approximate dates and with a pair of scissors we shaped our book. When the informant had remembered some past events as he told his life of several years later, with the scissors we moved the uprooted moments to their real time”. The contradiction is evident. Randall

defines herself as a “transmitter” of the “people’s voice”, but her role goes beyond this. She does not hesitate to intervene in the editing of the testimonies. She evens goes further and suggests the elimination of the reiterations of certain “sounds or pet words”, in order “to provide the text a syntactic coherence”. We do not understand why this could not have such coherence regardless of the corrections proposed by Randall. But more than criticizing this author in particular, we are interested in discussing the validity of certain practices which are very common when working with testimonies.<sup>17</sup>

One may object to the fact that some of the modifications proposed by Randall are valid, as well as others might also be. We can point out only a few general considerations on this issue which is of concern to specialists. In the first place, there should be some indication at the beginning of the publication of which modifications have been made and why. Secondly, the questions of interviewers should be maintained, for as Portelli states, “when the researcher’s voice is left out, the informant’s voice gets distorted”.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, it is necessary before intervening in the accounts to determine the meanings that certain forms of expression, words and reiterations may have. In this way, elements of meaning present in narrations would not be lost. These considerations are applied differently according to the type of study being conducted: a reconstruction of historical events, a study of mentalities, a publication of autobiographies, etc. Finally, with respect to this point, the precedent considerations do not exhaust the discussion of the issue, since other minor aspects such as contextualization of the testimonies, the preparation of notes, entitling the chapters, etc. These could be the object of a critical examination similar to the one we have made here.

## Conclusion: towards a dialogical hermeneutic research

In the preceding pages, we have succinctly covered relatively broad issues concerning the production and use of testimonies in social sciences. This analysis could lead to a skeptical conclusion, similar to the one we find in some post-modernist literary critics: the impossibility of representing the other, particularly the dominated ones. Certainly, the difficulties that we have pointed out are not of minor importance. They radically question a form of sociological empiricism (or the social sciences in general), the belief in an immediate, direct representation of the object of study, in this case of the popular subjects through testimonies. However, what has been objected to be a certain form of testimony interpretation, not the testimony itself. And this conception becomes evident in certain particular practices like the ones we have pointed out. It is ideological in the sense of the Frankfurt School: false consciousness of a reality which however also shows its contradictions and virtualities.

Overcoming testimonial empiricism is an unavoidable moment of the immanent critique of testimonies, but which can also show us its countless possibilities. What seems to be a monological representation, the testimonial account, reveals itself as a hidden dialog. Indeed, it

<sup>15</sup>I proceed here with the distinction between reliability and validity; with regard to testimonies, reliability has to do with the internal coherence of the account, while validity has to do with the content of truth that can be established concerning the narrated facts, although a non-valid testimony can also be very important as shown by Salomon with respect to the “lying informant”.<sup>69</sup> About this distinctions in oral history, see Hoffman.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Here I cannot go into detail concerning types of interviews. Altamirano<sup>70</sup> has raised the issue of the difference between the “thematic interview”, which “only seeks to obtain information on very concrete topics on human experience and forgets about other aspects which are not directly related to these, and the biographical interview or life histories”, where the social scientist is interested in knowing not only particular events but also “the context from which these were experienced”. Described this way, and in relation to the testimonies, the distinction seems a little confusing or non-existent, for in the first type of interview, we cannot leave out the vision or perspective from which the subject narrates the facts, however “objective” these may come to be. From my standpoint, the difference would lie rather in a shift of emphasis, but not in the exclusion of the perspective of the subject interviewed. In the first type of interview, this would be the account of facts; in the second one, all the biographical path of the subject.

<sup>17</sup>As a way of confirming what has been said, see the following description of the methodology used by Acuña<sup>31</sup> in his study on Putaendo: “during 1985 the field interviews were recorded, asking each subject to tell his life since childhood, asking some questions to deepen in the most neglected themes. Later, the cassettes were transcribed – between 2 a 4 per subject – in a textual manner. Finally, the work focused on the composition of the accounts writing them in such a way that they were legible, but maintaining the language and spontaneity of the accounts”

is a dialog between the researcher and the interviewees, but where the former has removed all traces of her presence in the account: his questions, the situation of the interview, the composition and editing of the testimonies. Consequently, it is not a completely effective dialog. One of the participants has kept or intended to keep the control of the discursive production (oral and in some cases written), although not always successfully, for there are cases in which the interviewee consciously hides certain aspects of her life or his group's, as well as that of people who have appeared a lot in the public eye and who have a pretty articulated account of their lives and transmit it to the researcher, who must display a lot of talent for penetrating beyond this structured account.<sup>18,72,73</sup> As an example of the first situation, the statement made by Rigoberta Menchú is worthy of attention: "of course, in all my narration I believe I project an image of my people, but still I keep hiding my Indian identity. I keep hiding what I feel nobody knows, not even an anthropologist or an intellectual, no matter how many books they have, they cannot distinguish all of our secrets".<sup>19,74</sup>

The studies conducted by historian Carlo Ginzburg about inquisition have shown that even under conditions of interrogation imposed by inquisitors, the accounts of the suspects contain elements of authenticity which can be retrieved through the contextual and historical analysis. It is about "intrinsically dialogical texts", either in an explicit manner as when the inquisitors must clear up the nature of beliefs of which they have no previous knowledge.<sup>75</sup> These testimonies are the result of a "profoundly unequal" social communication but susceptible of a deciphering which may reveal, as in the case of Benandanti de Friuli,<sup>76</sup> a "profound cultural stratum, alien to the culture of the inquisitors".<sup>75</sup> "This lack of communication at the cultural level between judges and the accused paradoxically allowed for the emergence of a true dialog - in the sense of an unresolved encounter of voices in conflict, according to what Bakhtin proposes".<sup>75</sup> In this way, in no case it may be argued that the testimonial account produced in the situation of an interview does not express -in diverse forms and degrees- the narrator's subjectivity; that is the vision and her way of discursively constructing and interpreting his experience. Obviously, the inquisitorial interrogation cannot be the paradigm of testimonies.

We think that the idea of the dialog could be explored from a hermeneutic perspective which does not exclude, but rather integrates the external theoretical analysis and the use of other methodologies, although here we cannot deal with the problem of its articulation.<sup>20,77</sup> It is a possibility which up to now has developed insufficiently within the social sciences. We do not fail to recognize the unavoidable risks

<sup>18</sup>Rolf Foerster (verbal communication) told me that this was one of the greatest difficulties that he went through to create the life history of mapuche leader, Martín Painemal Huenchual.<sup>72</sup> A less outstanding accomplishment is that Sonia Sotomayor Cantero, whose master's thesis (unpublished) on other mapuche leader José Santos Millao<sup>73</sup> sticks almost literally to the own life story of Santos. It was this type of problems which led Nevins and his collaborators into driving the oral history from the public figures to the most anonymous subjects.

<sup>19</sup>Surprisingly, Yúdice interprets this phrase as an expression of "irreducibility" of the aesthetic experience, but it deals with, I believe, something different. It is not that Menchú says that she cannot gather the experience of her entire people in one account (although this is no doubt the case), but she is not prepared to tell it to a stranger, to reveal her "secrets". Here, there is a problem of conscious limitation of the narration (In front of a third party). [indeed it is more complex, since Menchu also says that she might not know that secret]

<sup>20</sup>An interesting proposition in this sense has been developed by Batallán and García<sup>77</sup> whom I am indebted to. Their work suggested me the idea of a participating production of the anthropological knowledge although they do not gear it towards testimonies.

that it entails, for instance, the possible confusion between research and practical objectives. However, we believe that it might come to constitute a form of production and interpretation of testimonies. We do not pose it either as exclusive of others, but if our argument is plausible, any proposition concerning testimonies should tackle the central researcher and the subject under study.<sup>21,78-80</sup> As Gadamer says: "hermeneutics always sought to re-establish as a mayor task an altered or non-existent agreement".<sup>55</sup> testimonies could be seen as the result of a type of dialogical hermeneutical research, in which both participants, researcher and the subjects under study, should have equal participation in establishing the conditions of interview, revision and editing of the accounts. This would not exclude the analysis of the account on the part of the researcher, but it would consist of a self-reflection on the process of producing the account and on its own prior understanding as an active interpreter. A systematic prior understanding which would take the place of the theoretical- practical prior understanding of the subjects in social life, but which would not be imposed upon them. The self-reflection of the other participant on that same analysis could not be excluded. Both should be considered competent in their capacity to reflect critically on themselves and others, which Gadamer calls "an infinite conversation which starts over and over and never comes to an end".<sup>81</sup> It would be an account with several voices and modalities in which we might include, for example, the interview and the interpretations of both, interviewer and interviewee, or where the latter could at least revise the text for its corresponding editing and approval.

In this way, the testimonial account would not be transmitted directly by the narrator nor imposed by the researcher, but the result of their relationship. This certainly does not exclude the use of material from interview from an external perspective. However, when it comes to really tackling the subjectivity of the popular subject and not reconstructing certain historical milestones or "specific data" (although in this case the methodological precautions that we have pointed out are valid), it seems more appropriate to assume the dialogical nature of testimony as a form of social science which not only seeks to represent subjectivity but also to incorporate it into the research practice in an active manner. It would finally consist of recognizing the nature of subject of both participants in the dialog. Four decades ago, Sartre raised some clarifying issues. He pointed out as one of the elements of "confusion in the social sciences", the fact that "the researcher is considered as an absolute reference in connection with the subject questioned, when the fact that they can talk, respond, say things and understand one another is the result of the situation in which they find themselves".<sup>82</sup> The sociologist or the anthropologist must then place themselves and recognize themselves as members of a society (which he narrowly defined as "capitalist") and therefore recognize their own priori understanding of the subjects under study. Therefore, he cannot consider them as object either. "If we considered man as an

<sup>21</sup>On this point, the comprehensive vision of the social sciences, within which I include hermeneutics (Despite the remarks made by Gadamer concerning the fact that the fundamental aim of his philosophy was not, as seemed to derive from Truth and Method providing a new grounds to the "Geisteswissenschaften";<sup>78</sup> seems to exclude the conception of Schutz of the social scientist as a "neutral observer", who "separates from his biographical situation within the social world" and places himself in "being in a scientific situation".<sup>62,63</sup> At least in the case of testimonies, it is not possible to make a complete separation between these two plans. Let alone when the researcher has indeed to interact with the people and groups under study. This does not imply that there is no difference whatsoever between participating in a community and studying it, but it is not possible at all to make a radical distinction as suggested by Schutz. The idea by Habermas of the social scientist as a "virtual participant" seems more appropriate to me.<sup>80</sup>



object that must be known and, consequently, unknown, it is because he himself places in relation to another and in relation to himself as unknown".<sup>51</sup> The solution for Sartre is a sociology of situation which also demands an "understanding", what here is referred to as a dialogical hermeneutics, although Sartre in our judgment, stuck to a tradition prior to Gadamer, relates the understanding with the movement of "introspection". In any case it is a "situated knowledge" in which the distinction subjective-objective loses validity. Unlike a theoretical project like the one of Lévi-Strauss, for whom the "ultimate goal of human sciences is not the constitution of man but his dissolution",<sup>83</sup> Sartre suggests a turn towards man from a dialectic philosophical anthropology.<sup>22,84-86</sup> The instrument proposed today is debatable. Lévi-Strauss correctly pointed out the restrictions of the Sartrean anthropology, since this has as a unique reference the western society.<sup>83</sup> The hermeneutics that we propose here puts forward the dialog as a way of linking traditions and different ways of life, where the mayor difference, researcher subject-object under study may not be completely annulled, but at least debated for a more participating form of research, for which testimonies may represent a model and at the same time a meaningful expression.

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## Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>22</sup>This brief comment on the difference between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss does not seek to tell about the richness of the discussion.<sup>84</sup> In any case, the terms in which this was stated seem to have lost validity. It is not about choosing between a hermeneutics based on an existential-marxist philosophical anthropology and a structuralist analysis of the objective type. It's worth re-reading the remarkable reflections of Ricouer concerning the relationship between structuralism and hermeneutics.<sup>85</sup> However, one must note, as pointed out by Honneth,<sup>86</sup> the existence of a romantic spirit of rousseauian origin in Lévi- Strauss, which does not find a theoretical expression in structuralist terminology. This would approximate it, in my opinion, to a humanistic conception of the social sciences like that of Sartre, despite his many divergences with him.

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