

## BOOK REVIEW

# New Insights on Critical Epidemiology and the People's Health

## Nuevas reflexiones sobre epidemiología crítica y la salud de los pueblos

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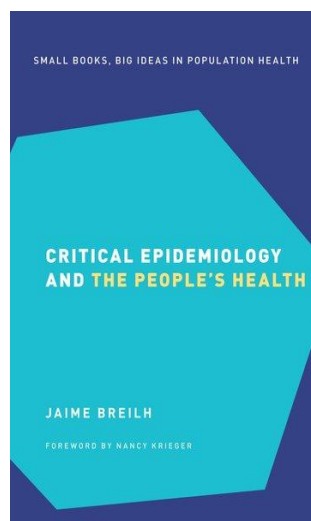
Jaime Breilh. *Epidemiología crítica y la salud de los pueblos. Ciencia ética y valiente en una civilización malsana.* Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador, y Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México, 2023.

This new book by Jaime Breilh was edited in English in 2021, in an edition by Oxford University Press, and as of 2023 we have a Spanish edition, from the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Quito, Ecuador. Without a doubt, this book represents a great contribution to the heritage of Latin American critical thought in health, and a milestone for the development of critical epidemiology. The name itself draws attention: Critical Epidemiology and the People's Health: Ethical and Courageous Science in an Unhealthy Civilization. Or, as Nancy Krieger says in her foreword, “critical ideas for tumultuous times.” Breilh's central argument is that we need emancipatory science and epidemiology, thought of from the south, that break the chains of Cartesian reductionism, and allow us to rethink health in terms of promoting life and well-being, within the framework of an intercultural philosophy and a meta-critical methodology, but above all, from the perspective of building a new society that is more humane, just, and supportive.

Breilh points out that capitalist society, in its desire for wealth accumulation, has taken inequality and suffering to the extreme, in addition to being responsible for environmental destruction caused by rampant extractivism that turns nature into a commodity. The society we live in produces enormous inequalities, which are at the root of the unequal distribution of health and disease in the population.

The book introduces the need to reconsider the social determination of health as a fundamental category to explain the health of the people. Traditionalist epidemiology focuses on the categories of person, time, and place. Person is

often reduced to the variables of age, sex, and occasionally occupation and ethnic group. The historical processes of human groups, as well as the dynamic embodiment of social class in health and illness are usually disregarded. Breilh clearly also differentiates between social determination as an explanatory category, from isolated social determinants, which have become dominant in public health and the bio-medical model in health sciences and healthcare. It highlights the need to understand and challenge the artificial separation of the biological and the social, which is inherent in Cartesian science, and to be open to view health determination as the basis of an epistemic departure from classic epidemiology. The criticism that the only valid model of science is the Cartesian model ubiquitous in Western society, and the urgency of breaking with this model is strongly emphasized. This act produces an inevitable epistemic rupture with modern science, particularly epidemiology. English version:



The book contains two forewords, one by Nancy Krieger and another by Breilh himself, an introduction to critical epidemiology, and three chapters accompanied by an extensive and valuable bibliography. The book will be mandatory reading for all interested in the people's health, not only as an object of study but as a fundamental subject of any transformation intended to be promoted in the health field, and to make the field more humane, supportive, and just.

In the first chapter, Breilh recounts the emergence of Latin American critical thought in health, noting that it is not about discarding the contributions of linear epidemiology but recognizing and overcoming its multiple limitations, to turn it, from his critical perspective, into an instrument of social transformation. He highlights the contributions of the social medicine and collective health movement, from its earliest antecedents in Eugenio Espejo, through Allende, Paredes, and Carrillo, recognizing the valuable contribution of Juan Cesar García and other Latin American thinkers such as Almeida, Paim, Laurell, Arouca, Menéndez, Escudero, and Samaja, among others. The second chapter is dedicated to answering why a Critical Epidemiology is necessary and what categories characterize it, promoting and enhancing it as a transforming instrument. The third chapter presents the proposal of a new method, characterized as meta-critical, transdisciplinary, and intercultural.

As Waitzkin points out in his commentary on the book, Jaime Breilh is undoubtedly one of the most influential and creative epidemiologists in the world today, and now with the publication of his text in English, as Horton, editor of the *Lancet*, says in a comment published in the prestigious journal, he opens the eyes and shakes Anglo-

Saxon epidemiological thought, opening the hope for a different science that can guide us to a safer, healthier, and more peaceful planet. We are trapped in a cage - says Norton - from which we can hardly escape, but this book helps us do so, after which we can see a different world, which drives us to different actions.

Finally, a few brief lines about the author -Breilh- is an Ecuadorian doctor. After getting a master's degree in social medicine, *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Xochimilco*, Mexico City, tutored by the prestigious Swedish-Mexican scientist Asa Cristina Laurell, he went to London to study the most classical and quantitative epidemiology. However, he already had a clear perception of its limitations and its reductionist character. His first text on critical epidemiology subverted the epidemiological order, pointing out the limitations of classical epidemiology to understand the health of populations, due to the reductionist nature of its methodological approach and practice. His work as a researcher and professor is extensive, he has been president of the Ecuadorian Academy of Medicine and dean of his university, *Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar*. Currently, he is the chair of the Center for Research and Laboratory of Impacts on Collective Health (CILAB SALUD), and coordinates the PhD Program in Collective Health, Environment, and Society. He has many published books and papers. He is considered one of the founders of the Latin America critical Social Medicine and Collective Health. However, above all his many academic merits, he is a warrior defending life, and social justice.

This is the link to download the book in Spanish through the digital repository of the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar:

<https://repositorio.uasb.edu.ec/handle/10644/9720>

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