

Young people in Popular High Schools: Between individuation and political subjectivation

Jóvenes en Bachilleratos Populares: Entre la individuación y la subjetivación política

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Abstract

In this article we seek to relate the concept of political subjectivation with the contributions of the sociologies of the individual, looking forward to generating theoretical and methodological tools that enrich a located analysis of young people's experiences in Popular High Schools in Argentina. Our main hypothesis is that there is a distance between the students' initial expectations and these schools' institutional proposal, that can be expressed as a latent tension between individuation and subjectivation processes. It questions how to study youngsters' individuation processes, in which the scholar trial is crucial, without disattending the political subjectivation processes presented as possible. In methodological terms, it inquires how to approach young people's experiences with an attitude of epistemological surveillance, and reflects on the potentialities of the biographic approach. It concludes that this perspective can provide with suitable theoretic-methodological tools for the objectives of this research, giving priority to the production of life stories.

Keywords

Socially disadvantaged youth, individuals, politics, Educational sociology, adults' education, methodology.

Resumen

Este trabajo busca contribuir a la noción de subjetivación política a partir de los aportes de las sociologías del individuo para abordar las trayectorias educativas de jóvenes que estudian en Bachilleratos Populares. Se parte de la hipótesis de que existe una distancia entre las expectativas iniciales de los estudiantes jóvenes y la propuesta institucional de estas escuelas, que puede expresarse como una tensión latente entre procesos de individuación y de subjetivación. Se interroga cómo estudiar los procesos de individuación, en los que la *prueba escolar* resulta nodal, sin desatender los procesos de subjetivación política que se presentan como un horizonte posible pero no certero. En términos metodológicos, se indaga acerca de cómo abordar las experiencias de estos jóvenes desde una actitud de vigilancia epistemológica y se reflexiona acerca de las potencialidades del enfoque biográfico. Se concluye que esta perspectiva puede brindar herramientas teórico-metodológicas acordes a los objetivos de la investigación, priorizando la construcción de relatos e historias de vida.

Palabras clave

Juventud desfavorecida, individuos, política, Sociología de la educación, educación de adultos, metodología.

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Introduction and state of the issue

Since the end of the 20th century, education has become very central in the struggles and in the public debate on the social problems of Latin America, making visible the close link between pedagogy and politics. Faced with the most critical effects of globalization on national state projects, traditional institutions and political and historical identities, this (re) encounter has been expressed in the last decades in student and teacher mobilizations in defense of the right to education, as well as in the emergence of new pedagogical initiatives within social movements and organizations, educational experiences of strong prefigurative imprint (Ouvina, 2011) that include the formation of political subjects among their horizons.

In the case of Argentina, one of the most significant and resonant experiences, governed by a recovery of the political and emancipatory imprint of education, is that of the Popular *High School*, middle-level schools for youth and adults, which began to emerge in 2004 in territorial organizations and recovered factories.

After the social collapse produced by the dismantling of the State in the 90s, a large part of the social and political organizations began to integrate their struggles with the daily construction of the future world in terms of education, work, housing, health, etc. At the beginning, in 2003, a period of greater state intervention that implied the deployment of multiple strategies of the State “within the own territories where these social movements had been consolidated in the years of the ‘protest cycle’ between 1993-2003” (Aguiló and Wahren, 2014, p. 99), many of these organizations bet to expand their territorial deployment.

As part of that process, and within the framework of the emergence of educational initiatives promoted in and by social movements throughout the continent¹, in Argentina the Popular High Schools of Young People and Adults (hereinafter, BPJA) set out a dual horizon: the construction of popular power from the territories, through the praxis of popular education and self-managed organization, and -in simultaneous- the interpellation to

1 Among the most significant are the schools of the Sem Terra Movement (MST) of Brazil, the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Education System of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico, the Intercultural University of the Nationalities and Indigenous Peoples “Amawtay Wasi”, Imposed by CONAIE in Ecuador and the Peasant Movement University of Santiago del Estero (MOCASE-VC).

the State as guarantor of the right of all social sectors to education (Elisalde, 2008), which is why they demand state recognition.

Currently, there are more than 96 BPJA throughout the country², which define themselves as self-managed, with political and pedagogical autonomy with respect to the State, and carry out a political-pedagogical project linked to popular education in Latin America with an emancipatory imprint, tending to promote forms of active and political citizenship among students, and the formation of people aware of the reality in which they live (Rubinsztain, 2012) and capable of constituting themselves as political subjects with full rights (Elisalde, 2008).

In this context, the field of studies on BPJA has visibly expanded in recent years - within the framework of the expansion of the area of knowledge about education “in and from social movements” (Michi, Di Matteo and Vila, 2012) - and it is possible to identify a rich variety of approaches and topics of interest. However, we consider that the issue of political subjectification has not been sufficiently addressed and problematized from the students’ experience: it is common to find studies that allude to the type of subjects that the BPJA intend to form, defined as “*political subjects*”, “*critical*”, “*conscious*”, “*participatory*”, “*reflective*”, etc. (Elisalde, 2008, Areal and Terzibachian, 2012, Rubinsztain, 2012), but few account for the relationship between these objectives and the wishes, expectations and experiences of the students.

In turn, the academic production that addresses the political subjectification in a juvenile key in these schools is relatively scarce. Given the youthfulization of the population of Youth and Adult Education in general, and the simultaneous visibility of youth as a social and political actor (Kriger, 2014), we believe it is necessary to focus the study on this population³. In this regard, we recover the studies that state that the institutional and pedagogical model of the BPJA has a particular impact on the educational trajectories of young people (Mereñuk, 2011), and that

2 The First National Survey of Popular Baccalaureate, carried out by the GEMSEP (Group of Studies on Social Movements and Popular Education) in 2015, gives an account of the existence of 93 BPJA. Since then, at least three new schools have opened with this modality, in the province of Río Negro and in the City of Buenos Aires.

3 Since the emergence of the BPJA, it has been recognized that the student population is younger than adult (Elisalde, 2008), in tune with the situation of Education for Young People and Adults (EDJA) during the last two decades (Sirvent, 2007).

it predisposes them “positively to participation, generating attitudes of potentiality. politics’ “(Kriger and Rybak Di Segni, 2011, p. 6) that promote the awareness of their status as” young subjects and new citizens “(page 6).

We seek to make these works more complex from a perspective that can address youth experiences without pretending that they are, in advance, *liberating, emancipating or transforming of subjectivity*.

The present article seeks to link, then, the notion of political subjectification with the contributions of the sociologies of the individual, to nourish located analysis of the experiences of young people in Popular *High Schools*. In the framework of an ongoing doctoral⁴ research, we propose to coin new conceptual tools and share the reflections that guided the choice of the biographical approach as a theoretical-methodological perspective. Currently we are doing field work, so we will not work even on empirical findings, but on the conceptual framework that sustains our work.

As Larrondo (2012) argues, returning to Lahire, “the contradiction, ambiguity, disagreement or concordances between young people and schools are not a strange phenomenon: it is part of the logic of the link between socialization, perception and action of the subjects in any type of institution “(2012, p. 21). In the case of popular high school, Garcia (2011) notes that in research the positions of teachers and students tend to be homogenized, and Gluz (2013) observes that “both militancy and the formation of political subjects have a force in teacher discourse that cannot find a correlate in the students “(2013, p. 70).

We propose then that to address the experiences of youth training in popular high school is necessary to make visible the distance between their initial expectations, largely related to pragmatic demands such as qualification, employment inclusion and social mobility (Brusilovsky, 2005) - and the institutional proposal. That is why we consider it necessary to reflect on the potentialities and limitations of the notion of political subjectification to address the school experiences of these young people, and there *the sociologies of the individual* (Martuccelli and De Singly, 2012) enable a vast terrain of inquiry.

4 This is the doctoral project “Social movements and education: a diachronic study on proposals and experiences of youth political subjectification in Popular High Schools”, directed by Dr. Miriam Kriger.

As a starting point, this theoretical perspective begins with the identification of a “growing process of social disincrustation of biographical patterns, associated with the processes of individualization” (Saraví, 2009, p. 29) typical of the weakening of social institutions in the post-industrial period. Based on this, he argues that the problematic basis of individual experience in contemporary culture is that individuals are required to autonomously manage their biographical experiences, with unprecedented levels of reflexivity and sensitivity (Saraví, 2015).

Within this line, we will recover the notions of individuation and subjectivation that Danilo Martuccelli (2007) identifies as two “sociological individual ways” (2007, p. 19). The first studies the process by which society is endowed with individuals, which - although with multiple variants - is crossed by all human beings. Unlike the first, the second focuses on the moral figure of emancipation as a horizon, as a possible but not accurate conquest that, therefore, does not cover all individuals (Martuccelli, 2010).

We ask ourselves about the implications of subjectification appearing as an explicit horizon, materialized in concrete proposals in the BPJA, with certain specific guidelines about the type of subjects -*political, critical, conscious*- that one seeks to form.

In this sense, and starting from the hypothesis that the tension between the processes of individuation and of subjectivation is constitutive of the experience of the young people who study in BPJA, we seek to coin theoretical-methodological tools that allow us to account for this coexistence, recovering elements of both analytical approaches. First, we question: How to analyze the processes of individuation of young people, considering their specific experiences in facing *schooling*, but without neglecting the study of the processes of subjectivation that are presented as a possible horizon? Or, conversely, how to study the processes of subjectivation that young people can go through, without falling into a generalization that obstructs the singularities of their “manufacturing processes” (Martuccelli, 2010, p. 9) as individuals? Secondly, in methodological terms, the question arises about how to approach the experiences of young people from an attitude of epistemological vigilance (Bachelard, 1979) that avoids the bias that has characterized the training processes in the BPJA as producers of *political subjects*, generally produced by an identification with the object of study.

We consider that these questions contribute to the construction of conceptual tools referenced in the sociology of education that can enrich the

field of critical pedagogies -beyond the specific case of the BPJA and the socio-educational context of Argentina- and allow to address a new perspective is the study of school experiences of Popular Education, citizen education and/or political training of young people from disadvantaged sectors.

The challenge of individuation: demands and experiences in the singular

From the end of the 20th century to the present, the post-industrial era has been characterized by various European authors as reflexive modernization (Beck, 1997), “high modernity” (Giddens, 1997, p 118) and, among others, “demodernization”. “, A term coined by Touraine (1997, p. 27) that proposes the existence of two simultaneous processes, deinstitutionalization and de-socialization, which imply the loss of identity resources and, fundamentally, a climate of risk and uncertainty for the social actors. In other words, it is argued that the weakening of institutions and structural factors that in previous periods could contain subjects has led to an unmarking of individuals who, against the pretensions of functionalism, no longer find a predefined role to play in society⁵.

In relation to our problem, it is interesting to propose the study of the common tests that a society goes through and that are presented as challenges that “circumscribe a set of major structural challenges, particularly significant” (Araujo and Martuccelli, 2010, p. 84). These tests are specific to each society, associated -even in spite of globalization- to national borders (Martuccelli and De Singly, 2012), so that the work that individuals do to face them is the main vector of their process of individuation. In this sense, the experience of success or failure in overcoming these tests (with the infinity of vicissitudes that can entail) marks the trajectories of individuals and, depending on the responses and “the resources they mobilize in a specific context”. of social determinations “(Araujo and Martuccelli, 2010, p. 87), gives them shape.

5 The Latin American situation presents particularities that cannot be exactly homologated to the European process, given the differential scope that welfare states have had on both continents and, therefore, the unequal impact of their weakening. We will not delve into the specificity of individuation processes in Latin America here, but we will recover works that account for them, placing the focus on young people in contexts of social inequality (Saraví, 2009 and 2015, Di Leo and Camarotti, 2013)

According to this perspective, the first social and existential test facing the modern individual is “to be able to sustain oneself in a world that does not contain it more with the strength with which it did in other periods” (Martuccelli, 2007, p. 66), in a context in which the social mandate prevails of being autonomous and independent, that is to say; owner of himself and capable of self-sustaining. Quoting Beck, Martuccelli (2007) states that “the main institutions of society (work, employment, school, family) would be increasingly oriented towards the individual, forcing each person to develop and assume their own biographical trajectory” (2007, p. 33). In this context, since the belief in the ideal of the sovereign individual is so ingrained, the *supports* - links, activities, spaces and material and immaterial elements that sustain the individual in the world - are rendered invisible to demonstrate solidity and self-sufficiency.

Subjectivation as a horizon: in search of the potential for emancipation

Starting from a conception of political subjectification linked to a construction of a cultural and non-evolutionary type, according to which men and women are always social subjects but not necessarily become full political subjects (Kriger, 2014), in previous work (Said and Kriger, 2014) we have put Freire and Rancière in dialogue. From different disciplinary approaches and fields, both account for the tensions subject/emancipation, individual/collective in the process of political subjectivation, and coincide in identifying that political subjectivation consists in the verification of the equality of human beings; and that is conquered in a communicative act.

Regarding the first point, we take Rancière’s term *equality effect* and find it comparable to what Freire defines as *humanization*, insofar as both refer to the way in which the oppressed, the uncontained, become subjects as soon as they succeed in becoming present, for others and for themselves, as beings with the same capabilities and humanity as those who until then denied them. This process is nothing other than subjectivation, the affirmation of the “we sumus, nos existimus” Cartesian plural (Rancière, 2010, p. 52), in which the field of experience is completely reconfigured, in collective and individual terms. It is from this that Rancière (2010) associates the effect of equality to emancipation (2010, p. 51), just as Freire (2009) links humanization with the “search for more” (2009, p. 41), and this one with struggle for liberation.

The second coincidence lies in the symbolic space in which subjectivation happens: both suggest that the encounter is not only mediated by the word but occurs in it. This does not mean, however, that we speak of an abstract and disconnected terrain of practice, but the opposite. For Freire, men gain significance as such in dialogue and, from his perspective, dialogue and word is one thing: “the unbreakable union between action and reflection”, that is, the praxis that transforms the world (Freire, 2009, p. 97). In Rancière’s approach, the word introduces the distortion of police logic in political logic, a verbal event that leads individuals to subject themselves when they prove “the distance between their condition as animals endowed with voice and the violent encounter of equality of the logos” (Rancière, 2010, p. 54).

We believe it is paramount to recover this transformation of the individual into a subject to deepen the proposal of the sociology of individuation. As Martuccelli (2010) puts it, “the subject never precedes, it is not something that is given (...). It supposes a logic of explicit or implicit emancipation, that is to say, not all of us are subjects, only some manage to be” (2010, p. 7). In this sense, being (making-us) subjects implies a projection, possible but not certain, that requires a specific work of individuals, put to the test by their societies. Here the dialectical relationship between reflection and action occupies a fundamental role for the process of subjectivation, which, while remaining a collective challenge, becomes an immediate demand (here and now) for each one.

This conceptualization responds to the author’s intention to single out the analyzes without abandoning the collective vision (Martuccelli, 2007), and in turn attending to the multiple tensions already stated. In this regard, he concludes that in the matrix of subjectivation “the relationship with itself is always studied as the result of an opposition between the logic of power and its social questioning” (2007, p. 29), that is, as an open door to emancipation and also franked by multiple limiting conditions, on which the individual must work - and overcome them - to become subject.

Between individuation and subjectification: the tension before the school proving

As we have seen, in contemporary societies, individuals face, either concretely or potentially, processes of individuation and subjectivation. Recovering our hypothesis, we consider that the BPJA are a privileged

scenario for the expression of the tension between both processes, which makes itself flesh in the bodies of young students.

Taking into account that the social and symbolic compulsory nature of the secondary school in Argentina is legally reaffirmed in 2006, with the approval of Law 26,206, the completion of the level has been consolidated as an unavoidable requirement for young people and adults. This is, in Martuccelli's terms, the "school proving" (Martuccelli, 2007; 2013), understood as the common challenge in contemporary societies to complete compulsory education, which adopts specific characteristics according to each social context. As Nobile (2016) argues, when compulsory secondary education is incorporated into the normative pattern that defines the life trajectory of those who are of age to attend it, "it becomes a requirement for contemporary young people; that is, a structural test that they are obliged to face" (2016, p. 122).

However, if secondary education has become a social goal in the Latin American context (Rivero, 2012), for students of the Youth and Adult Education modality (EDJA) it represents an even greater challenge, given that it is common to find stories that describe the school trajectory of these young people in terms of failure (Martuccelli and De Singly, 2012) for what they have not been able to do: sustain *traditional schooling*, an idea that is based on previously standardized theoretical trajectories that correspond less and less with the real educational trajectories of adolescents and young people (Terigi, 2010). This negative evaluation, bordering on the moral qualification and the normalizing stigma, is usually promoted by the public discourse, and even by the academic (Télliez Velasco, 2011) which refers to young people who do neither study nor work-. Far from recognizing them as a population at risk of education (Sirvent, 2007) or identifying "the lack of institutional offers that understand the reality they live on a daily basis" (Ramírez, 2013, p. 77), individual responsibility falls of these young people.

Faced with this "double obligation" (D'Aloisio, 2014) -legal and symbolic- of the secondary school, and the effectiveness of public policies aimed at guaranteeing compliance, the arrival of young adolescents to the Popular High Schools is associated with explicit goal of finishing high school and *overcome* the school challenge, and usually respond to the recommendation of a family member or friend, prioritizing the proximity of home or place of work and the possibility of making compatible the course with family and work schedules, attend with children to class, among others,

but not to the specificity of the pedagogical political proposal. Simultaneously, young people find a school framed in a social organization, whose objective is to form political subjects from collective participation, decision and organization practices, which differ in many aspects of the traditional image about secondary school and the prescriptions about *ways* of being a student.

We consider that this meeting between the needs of the students and the institutional purposes of the BPJA represents the central tension of our study: taking from Araujo and Martuccelli (2010) the affirmation that “the work of individuals to produce themselves as subjects is conditioned by What concerns the simultaneous action of the ideal and social experience “(2010, p. 88), we propose that although the objectives of the BPJA may not respond, in the first instance, to the personal expectations of young people, their contingent appearance in the school experience, and the interweaving of these ideals with their own - framed in a deeper dialogue between the multiple actors of the educational community (teachers, militants, students, families, etc.) - have a unique influence on their work to produce themselves as subjects and in the construction of their personal and social identity (Kriger and Fernández Cid, 2011). This coincides with the understanding of politicization as a complex psychosocial process, individual and collective, intra and intersubjective, in permanent movement (Kriger, 2014), whose analysis requires a multidimensional and situated approach.

Given that the focus is on the experiences of the young people themselves as they go through these processes, the question arises as to how to approach them, to know them, to reach them. How to access the particular constellation of elements that make up each process of constitution of young people as individuals and, perhaps also - although not necessarily - as political subjects? How to know if the participation, the organization, the politics, so central in the institutional discourse of the Popular High School, and in particular in our study, are significant for the students who experience them and, therefore, constitutive of their experience?

The biographical approach as a proposal for an approach

Dubet and Martuccelli (1998) state that in the school the actors are socialized through different learning, such as the integration of school

culture, the construction of strategies on the school market, the subjective management of knowledge and the cultures that carry them] and they constitute themselves as subjects in their capacity to manage their experience. In this sense, they point out, “all education is (...) a work on oneself” (1998, p. 14). This work is defined as a “social experience” (p.15) that involves the will of the actor to define his situation and build images of himself. It involves putting into play a “distancing of oneself, a critical capacity and an effort of subjectivation” (p.15).

This leads to two simple but fundamental conclusions: a) that there is a multiplicity of aspects of school life that far exceed the proposal formalized in the curriculum; and b) that this variety of experiences requires from the individuals a considerable capacity of agency to cross them, give them meaning and integrate them. Such an inherently reflective and critical task is called *experience*, and constitutes the main tool for the construction of subjectivity.

The contribution we wish to make is especially in addressing what escapes, transcends, and/or questions the stated objectives of certain proposals linked to popular education. In this sense, although we agree with Langer and Levy (2009) in that the BPJA, by locating “participation as the main content to teach and to learn, they return the ‘hidden curriculum’ not so hidden” (2009, p. 245), We consider that it is necessary to focus on what, beyond the efforts of organizers, teachers and promoters of these schools to promote de-concealment, occurs but is not said (or, even, is not decidable), in relation to participation and politics.

This reinforces the need to document the undocumented aspects (Rockwell, 2009) of the school experience through the voices of its protagonists. In continuity with what Freire and Rancière have said about language as a place for the process of subjectivation, we consider that the biographical approach (Arfuch, 2002) can allow a very interesting approach, based on the subjective potential of self-narration itself -and of the “us” -.

To begin with, Delory Momberger’s (2014) biographical concept recognizes that narration is prior to enunciation and that it consists of a constant activity of building experience from the situations experienced. From this, the “(auto) biographical” narrative is “a privileged modality of biographical operations” (2014, page 699), which involves deep processes of reflexivity. On the same path, Scott (2001) proposes “refusing a separation between experience and language, and instead insist on the productive

quality of discourse” (2001, p. 65). With this, he affirms that subjects “have agency” (p.66) and are discursively constituted.

In the study of educational experiences, Suárez (2014), states that the “expansion of narrative (auto) biographical practices has contributed to the emergence of new subjects, experiences and pedagogical discourses that dispute meanings and legitimacy regarding how to name, make and think about education and training “(2014, page 764). By presenting the teachers as narrators of their own school experiences, the author states that:

They stop being what they were, they transform themselves, and they are others. They assume a reflective position that challenges their own understandings, reconfigures their own professional trajectories and resignifies their own actions and interpretations of the school (...) Narrating is thinking and re-thinking in writing about our practices, our lives, our worlds, invent them by re-naming them but with other words, is to be formed together with others (Suarez, 2011, p. 19).

From our perspective, the process it describes, being associated with what happens in the narrative, may well be extrapolated to the autobiographical account of the juvenile school experience. In the field of sociology, Di Leo and Camarotti (2013) recover the category of evidence proposed by Martuccelli and propose to approach the lives of young people from a perspective that considers “the diversity of situations and the complex and even contradictory interconnections in which they constitute their individual identities and their social experiences”(2013, p. 21). This is how they recover the methodological proposal of Leclerc-Olive (2009) for the construction of autobiographical stories. Before the initial proposal to write and publish their life story, the researchers carry out successive interviews with young people, in which they begin with the question about *who they are* and how they would describe themselves - their “subjective self-identification” (Di Leo and Camarotti, 2013, p. 23), and then go on to reconstruct the *turns of existence*-moments or situations that marked their lives-considering as significant those events conceived as such “by the interviewees themselves and not by the researcher” (2013, p. 24).

In summary, the approaches presented share the objective of approaching the processes of construction of the identities and social experiences of the subjects through processes of reflexivity that prioritize the voice of the protagonists, and in which the work is always active and unfinished. For the

purposes of our research, we consider that they result from an invaluable wealth to maintain an attitude of epistemological vigilance (Bachelard, 1979) in the analysis of the experiences of young people who study in Popular High schools, simultaneously enabling the registration of the senses assigned to the overcoming the school test and the processes of individual and collective transformation that may involve the processes of political subjectification.

Final thoughts and perspectives

Throughout this work we have considered the contribution that the concepts of individuation and subjectivation of Martuccelli can make to the studies on popular education spaces. In a way, the question that guides us is: How to study political subjectification in times of individuation? How to account for the simultaneous imbrication of these processes without assuming them, a priori, mutually exclusive? How, in methodological terms, can we overcome the bias of premonitions about popular education and make room for what emerges as emerging in the experience of young people in Popular High schools?

Before the first question, about how to study the processes of political subjectivation that young people can go through without denying the challenges inherent in their construction as individuals, we have identified certain bases for a possible encounter: the axis would be to analyze the way in which young people who study in BPJA are identified, from multiple experiences and tests that transcend the school environment, but paying special attention to the way in which they appropriate, reject and/or transform for themselves the ideals of political subjectification (in emancipatory key and collective) proposed by the institution. This would allow knowing the way in which those ideals are inscribed in their work as individuals, either as a social experience or as internalized ideals.

In summary, it is about this *construction* as *subjects* that we are empirically investigating in field work, to access the subjective meanings that young people assign to the educational experience in the BPJA, putting the axis in the process of shaping individual identities and collective That is why we consider it fundamental to incorporate the perspective of the actors

themselves, listening to the voices of young people and recognizing their resistance.

On the other hand, before our second question about how to access the subjective meanings that young people assign to their experiences in the BPJA, we consider that the biographical approach can provide theoretical-methodological tools suitable for deepening our research objectives, through construction of stories and life stories. Since experience is not “what happens, or what happens, or what arrives, but what happens to us, or happens to us, or arrives to us” (Larrosa, 2003, p. 168), our interest lies in knowing the way in which young people interpret, appropriate, resist and / or reject the institutional proposal with their own frames of meaning.

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