

An Invitation to Improve the World¹

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Sociology is a fairly straightforward discipline. As social scientists we systematically study society as a means of improving social conditions. In this sense, Sociology is an invitation to improve the world we live in. As sociologists, this is both the hope and promise of our work. This is not, however, where I start each semester when I walk into my introduction to Sociology courses. Rather, I begin my course by telling my students the story of Pedro Ortiz, who, although unbeknownst to him, was the first person to push me to think sociologically about the world. In the space that follows I relay this story to you as a means of revealing the power of the “sociological imagination” to help us understand the world we live in. As you read through my story I invite you to think of similar experiences that you have had in your lifetime.

Pedro and I worked together on construction sites near Telluride, Colorado between 2001 and 2005. Although Pedro and I were unable to communicate well, I recall finding myself strongly moved by what I was able to make out of his personal story. Through gestures and broken English he explained to me that he left his native Mexico for the first time in the 1980s to work in the southwestern United States. When I asked him where he was from he quickly rambled off a series of names that I could not make out. Noting my confusion, he responded “León, Guanajuato.” I recall partially capturing the first word he pronounced and gathering very little of the second word due to the fact that I was unable to pronounce more than the first syllable! My face must have revealed my bewilderment because he promptly responded, “You know, like a lion,” which he followed up with a trained gesture in which he brought his hands above his head and let out a loud, “RAAAAAA!” With such primitive communication we would often go hours without uttering a word but through occasional hand motions and laborious conversations, we each got to know a little about one another.

Pedro began migrating to the United States as a teenager. Like many other young men his age he saw the United States, or *El Norte* as he colloquially referred to it, as the only means of getting ahead in life. Indeed, there were likely few people from his hometown who had made anything of themselves that had not done so by emigrating to the U.S. Like most rural towns across Mexico, emigration seemed like the only way to achieve one's dreams. In the early years Pedro would take trains across northern Mexico and walk through the desert to work in the zucchini and fruit fields of the Southwest. Eventually he began working construction in Telluride, CO, where he ended up working for fifteen years with BONE Construction. He began working on the cleanup crew but he quickly moved into framing and finished carpentry. Over the years he worked on countless mega-mansions in and around Telluride. Today, as a Sociologist, I find it unsettling that Pedro spent his life constructing mansions for the uber-wealthy so that he could afford to build a small home for himself in his native Mexico. In any case, in the early 2000s Pedro was able to solicit permanent residency in the United States at which point he petitioned to bring his wife and

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six children to live with him in the small town of Nucla, Colorado. By this time Pedro and I had lost contact. However, in the fall of 2006, while home on a break from my first semester of graduate school, I tracked down Pedro's number and gave him a call. By this time I spoke rather fluid Spanish, and as the reader might imagine, I was quite excited to talk with the man I had worked side by side with for so many hours without exchanging much more than an occasional phrase or pantomime.

Pedro's wife, Belem, answered the phone and after we exchanged several brief formalities, she passed me on to her husband. Pedro and I spoke for roughly half an hour, in which time he told me a bit more about himself. As it turned out, Pedro was from a small town named Rancho Viejo de Torres, which is located in Valle de Santiago, Guanajuato. Coincidentally, my wife is also from Guanajuato. As a result, we had a great deal more in common than either of us expected. We began talking about the different places we had both visited in Guanajuato and before we hung up, Pedro invited me to visit him and his family the next time they were back home. Like many immigrants, Pedro had built a modest house in his hometown, which he went back to visit once or twice a year. Unfortunately, Pedro and I were never able to meet up in Mexico. A week after we talked on the phone he passed away suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage. He died on January 3rd, 2008, four days shy of his 45th birthday.

The first time I met Pedro Ortiz I had just finished High School. At the time I was not even aware that the discipline of Sociology existed. However, I do recall having fairly cut and dry ideas of how the world worked, and at the ripe age of eighteen I honestly thought that I had most things figured out. At the time, for example, I was firmly against undocumented immigration. Like many of my contemporaries, I thought that immigrants should simply "get in line" like everyone else had. In retrospect I realize that my ideas about life were mainly informed by the opinions of those I chose to surround myself with. In many instances, the emotions I associated with these personal relationships blinded me from seeing the complex nuances of reality. As I got to know Pedro, however, I suddenly found myself asking questions that did not seem to have clear-cut answers. Why had Pedro left his hometown? How often did he go back? How did he cross the border? How much money did he send back each month? Were his family members better off because he had left? How did he feel about living in the U.S.? How did his fellow workers treat him? And just as importantly, what was the fate of the millions of other men and women like Pedro that crossed into the United States to work each year?

In time I found that Sociology provided me a means through which to answer these types of questions. As I advanced with my graduate studies I made it my goal to shed light on the legacy of men and women like Pedro. For me, my late friend's life gave immigration a human component. By revealing his story to me Pedro pushed me to see emigration as a human struggle as oppose to a simple political debate. Moreover, through Pedro I came to realize that immigration policies—and public policy in general—have a lasting effect on the lives of millions of people. Whether we choose to build walls on the border or grant amnesty to undocumented immigrants, what is certain is this: The decisions we make today will continue to define society well into the future.

In my own work, for example, I analyze the effect of emigration on development outcomes in central Mexico. Indeed, Mexican immigration to the United States is unique in nature.

Currently there are an estimated 40.4 million immigrants in the United States and 11.7 million are from Mexico. Among these individuals, somewhere around 12 million reside in the United States without proper documentation, and 56 percent of all undocumented immigrants in the United States are from Mexico (Pew Research Center 2012, and Britz and Batalova 2013). Not surprisingly, in recent years politicians and citizens alike have called for an overhaul of the United States' immigration system. Still, reform proposals have focused almost exclusively on domestic policy—increasing border patrol agents, building walls along the border, deporting undocumented immigrants, etc.—as a means of controlling immigration. Far less attention is lent to the role of international factors in driving emigration in the first place.

Unfortunately, as my own research in central Mexico reveals, by failing to address the principal causes of emigration from migrant-sending countries—i.e., poverty, inequality, lack of access to education and healthcare, unemployment, internal strife, etc.—current immigration reform in the United States is unlikely to substantially reduce immigration flows. As my work demonstrates, in order to effectively control immigration representatives must address the actual causes of mass emigration in migrant-sending societies. My findings indicate that the best way—and perhaps the only way—to “control” immigration into any country is by supporting meaningful development in migrant-sending states. To do otherwise is a clear disservice to taxpayers of all political stripes.

As this example demonstrates, how we choose to manage society matters a great deal, for the decisions we make today will impact future generations for years to come. In this sense, politics is a high stakes game, and in matters of such high stakes, the devil is in the details. In my mind, this is why Sociology is so vital to our world. Using actual data to understand how society works gives us leverage in the political decisions that we make. Through the careful, systematic analysis of society we can arrive at better solutions for the most pressing issues of our times. This includes immigration but also applies to other social issues such as war, healthcare reform, education, fertility rates, inner-city gang violence, drug abuse, unemployment, etc.

In short, Sociology invites us to think carefully about the relationship between individual action and larger social trends. By doing so we can expand our understanding of the world we live in, and in time, improve it.