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Malinowski Award Lecture, 2008
***The Application of the Social Sciences'
Contemporary Issues to Work on Participatory
Action Research***

Orlando Fals Borda

Dedicated to the memory of my dear late wife, the sociologist María Cristina Salazar, who died in Bogotá on July 10, 2006.

No one could have been more surprised than I when at the closing session of the 12th International Symposium on Action Research for Education, held at my home city of Bogotá, Colombia May 14-18, 2007 a number of delegates from Australia, Great Britain and the United States went to the podium to announce that I was the new recipient of the prestigious Bronislaw Malinowski Award of the Society for Applied Anthropology. I should travel to Memphis for this purpose.²

It is a motive of amazement to find my name in the honor roll together with scientists and authors of my considerable youthful reverence, the masters of my professors—a roster with names such as Gunnar Myrdal, Everett C. Hughes, Laura Thompson, Conrad Arensberg, and Margaret Clark. How did I finally fit into this sacred list? I am not going to question the criteria for choosing. My main duty, I feel, is to examine whether I merit such inclusion from the standpoint of continuity and/or accumulation of science, continuing some of the basic tenets of the discipline I learned in my university years in the United States.

**Accumulation of Knowledge and Rigor in
Contextual Determinacy**

I should admit, with rather ease, that I could not have been an actor in the development of PAR in the 70s if I had not available a sound and more or less firm starting ground on which to build alternatives. One early discovery was that the process of accumulation was not lineal, and more complex than what Newtonian physics thought. With my colleagues, we found ourselves in a complex field with many avenues, shortcuts, bridges, and even black alleys. And this multiple horizon, instead of confusing issues, seemed to help us understand the basic complexity of the reality we were observing and intervening in. Thus my first reflexion today goes to my dear professors Lowry Nelson at Minnesota and T. Lynn

Smith at Florida, both disciples of the great Pitirim Sorokin, for having provided me with sound foundation for what was to come, even though they confessed to me that they did not agree with the procedures or the frames of references of what we were doing. They tolerated me as their former Ph.D. student, and waited to see results. Alas, they both died before I could present them with clear cut evidence. But without the basic training I received from them, I could not have reached even the first base of respectability and validity for the tasks at hand. Therefore, my first final conclusion today is that PAR did fit into a major frame of experience, knowledge, feeling and intuition which could be traced to Homeric times, if the tradition was Western, or with Popol Vuh if one desired to confine himself to the preCikinbuab era.

Diversity was richer than expected. Perhaps overwhelming at times, but it provided us with a full cornucopia of new facts, data and interpretation, including general behaviour observation. Yet we could not find much consistence at the efforts of our teachers for finding universal laws. This was learned soon, even from the Planck. Heisenberg revolution in physics, who learned constructively from the jumping inconsistencies of energy. This indeterminacy was multiplied in the social and cultural world. And such was the great challenge which we had with PAR in our first attempts to make it understandable and acceptable for our academic seniors who still believed in a neutral science and in a sole subject-object stance. We were already founding that the horizontal relationship of subject to subject was more close to reality, more respectful of the milieux, and a multiplying effect for the transformation of social contexts which we were pushing.

Thus our methodology has overcome the old polemics on scientificity, value neutrality and validity of results. It has proven its utility to local reference groups for social purposes on five continents. This has advanced lately to the point that many colleagues have taken up, for PAR, the possibility of developing an alternative paradigm in

the social sciences, which appears to be arising from its theoretical-practical principles, that is, in a more ample and less classic definition of praxis.

For those of us who come from and live in the tropics, a new sense of social and political responsibility has appeared, to demonstrate in the practice and in our own context that we are able to face up to the severe crisis of our society, and to work with strength in transforming from top to bottom. We have justifications for this every day; in the case of Colombia, the urgency of doing much in this direction is growing day by day. Those of us who have been employing and learning from the PAR are convinced that this is a very important, perhaps the most applicable way to arrive at needed transformations.

And these changes should be so deep, that only an overall concept we have called "moral or total subversion" can include whatever is necessary. Hence the revival that we have experienced in later years, to raise our voices and apply the natural hypothesis of the "counterelite," a concept introduced since the 1970s.

Academic plus Popular Knowledge

Another important general guide for us from our PAR experience derives from a wise but forgotten Baconian principle: scientific modesty, the struggle against academic arrogance and imperialism. A gulf has been created between the "learned" and the "learner," as if the latter were minors without judgment and basic common sense about cause and effect. The first university, as in Uppsala, tried to be Baconian, but in Paris and Bologna there was a caste of the cap and gown as a classical expression of the academy. The distance with surrounding communities, cultures and natural contexts had been growing, and many of us who know that knowledge is multidimensional felt that we were missing much of importance from ignoring the accumulated experience and knowledge of the common people. Hence our general principle of the "summation of knowledges," which has certainly opened the eyes of many technicians and experts who thought they had a clear monopoly on knowledge.

With due recognition of complementary of techniques, we have found it useful to emphasize this principle, not only among ourselves in less advanced countries as in the tropical zones, but also between the North and the South of the world. We have called this the North-South Encounter, which has been one of the most interesting elements in our most recent world congresses, starting with the seventh at the University of Bath, in England. This has allowed a process of mutual enrichment which has helped in the dissemination and current acceptance of PAR and its related approaches (there may be about a dozen main expressions of such schools). We called this process praxis, and its discipline we called "praxiology," which is still under discussion. One question inevitably raised: is this progress or regress? It is too soon to say, except to note that the initial stage of introducing and

disseminating the idea is now complete. Institutionalization is perhaps inevitable where an idea proves its worth, though it may lose sometimes its original cutting edge in the process. It is not superfluous to recall our main motive for planting the seed of intellectual rebellion as an alternative for investigation in our countries. One motive was to protest against the sterile and futile university routine, colonized by Western Euro American culture and so subordinating that it impeded useful discovery of our own realities. So we worked on our own beyond the halls of learning which, on balance, still seems the right thing to have done.

Another motive, rather Quixotic and more utopian, was to right wrongs so as to improve the foundation of our crisis-ridden societies by fighting against their injustices and trying to eradicate poverty and other socioeconomic afflictions caused by the dominant systems. This was a hard, cruel, and at times dangerous struggle, which has in fact ended, though there may be things today or a new horizon, a different world, perhaps a more acceptable one than the old generation has suffered.

Cooptation and Disciplinary Convergence

Finally, the increasing and mutually respectful collaboration between North and South has taken PAR to an accelerated cooptation process since the 1997 world congress. It is calculated that about 2500 universities are now teaching and/or including PAR in their curricula. Assimilation of the participatory method has spread even further, as demonstrated by the fact that it is a central element of many government projects. It is often regarded as an alternative to the concept of today's rather obsolete "economic and social development," long beset by crisis. The subject has been treated at the last two world PAR congresses, one at Pretoria University (South Africa) and in Göttingen (Holland) last year. Many graduation theses today are acceptable as PAR topics and some have introduced postgraduate work.

The disciplinary nucleus of PAR has been chiefly sociological and anthropological, but is deploying into philosophy and more diverse disciplines like pedagogy, agronomy, veterinary science, medicine, nursing, dentistry, engineering, process management, social work, law, economics, history, painting and music, journalism and communications, literature, and ethnomathematics.

Advances since First 1977 World Congress have shown interesting ways to enrich fieldwork and theoretical disquisition pertaining to praxis, especially related to our tropics and subtropics. Care is given to the betterment of life conditions in exploited societies. Main techniques include the critical recovery of history and local culture, and a change of style of communication to make it easy for anyone in the communities to understand the problems being dealt with, thus combining academic erudition with common experience, which induces changes even in the personality of the activist researcher. Use of local dialects has been indispensable in this type of work.

Our work has been stimulated by related readings of theorists like Gregory Bateson's holism, Peter Reason's participatory worldview, and Stephen Kemmis's symposium research, and the theory of chaos (Mandelbrot and Lorenz), open systems (Gadamer, Mayr), complexity systems (Prigogine and Maturana), who worked on the pioneering monograph by Rodolfo Stavenhagen on decolonizing social sciences to combat North-South dependence. (Fals Borda and Mora Osejo 2003) We work in order to understand and explain our own contextual realities and to understand human solidarity as expressed in aboriginal, black, and peasant groups which have much to teach us. These groups are characterized by a strong non-violent ethos transmitted since pre-Columbian days.

General Conclusion

At present, in the North as well as in the South, we seem to have essential clarity on the inception of PAR, particularly concerning its validity and scientific rigor, the rhythm theory and practice, the balance between subject and object, and the ethical dilemmas on science and conscience. Our methodology is now faced with the creative challenge of constructing an alternative paradigm in a regional context for understanding and valuing the complexities of societies regarding their oral links, particular characteristics, present situations, and spontaneous natures. Our societies appear to be discovering how to withstand the onslaught of globalization so as to protect their identities and lives as autonomous nations and peoples.

Moreover, with PAR as our scientific task, we have the political objective of non-neutral duty fostering the democratic and spiritual dimension through more satisfying life systems. To this end, northern and southern scholars can converge as colleagues and as soul fellows for the quest of meaning.

This is a big challenge of today with universities of a new type working in rural and urban communities in most countries. Injections of modernism are not satisfactory; traditions may be more constructive, with their cultural movements. The voiceless should be given voice with respect. This is a way we now call rooted or authentic socialism taking root in South America. We need to become involved in these experiential transformations, as new researchers of life. The Greeks have given us a good rule for this: direct praxis should be complemented by ethical phronesis. Simple activism is not enough: it needs to be guided by good judgment in seeking progress for all.

Due to the internal conflict in Columbia, my old age, and ill health, I have been unable to do any further field work on PAR. Now that you know more, you are the masters. Keep it going. History is with you.

Notes

¹Editor's note: it has been my sad task to edit Dr. Fals Borda's work without the benefit of his feedback. Dr. Fals Borda died between the spring meeting at which he delivered this speech and the process of seeing it into press. I sincerely hope I have done justice to the spirit of his communication, and ask forgiveness of his many, many students wherever I have not.—David Griffith.

²Two days later, I received likewise information that I had received the 2008 Martin Diskin Lectureship Award of the Latin American Studies Association in recognition of the rise and development of PAR. This may signify a growing convergence in and between our social disciplines, as referred to below.

Reference

- Fals Borda, Orlando, and Luis E. Mora Osejo
2003 A Critique of Eurocentrism. *Action Research* 1(1): 19-38.