

THE APPLICATION OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION-RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICA*

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Abstract A research methodology that combines theory, action and participation (PAR) committed to further the interests of exploited groups and classes has been initiated and tried in many Third World countries since the 1970s. PAR claims inspiration from phenomenological and Marxist trends adjusted to regional realities and factors; it challenges established academic routines without discarding the need to accumulate and systematise knowledge, and to construct a more comprehensive and human paradigm in the social sciences; and it proposes a series of techniques to combine knowledge and power without falling into the dangers of world annihilation. This is illustrated with actual field studies and projects in Nicaragua, Colombia and Mexico.

Interest in Participatory Action-Research (PAR) has grown worldwide due to its pertinence to the initiation and promotion of radical changes at the grassroots level where unsolved economic, political and social problems have been accumulating a dangerous potential. PAR claims to further change processes in constructive non-violent ways due to its emphases on awareness-building processes, although it does anticipate revolutionary action in cases of collective frustration or belligerent reactionary violence applied at base levels and groups.

Such processes of radical change include scientific research, adult education and political action combined. That it can be done has been ascertained through a series of studies undertaken in many Third World countries by local scholars and activists. In Colombia, PAR studies started in the 1970s on the Atlantic Coast where further work has been completed in recent years. Some of these studies were sponsored by Canada's International Development Research Center (IDRC) and Bogotá's Punta de Lanza Foundation. Their results are now in published form under the title *Historia Doble de la Costa* (The Double History of the Coast) in four volumes (Fals-Borda 1979-1986).

The title of this work tells something of PAR methodology. It is a 'double history' because it is written in two styles or languages which run simultaneously on opposite pages: one for the non-initiated reader, presented in literary form; and the other for cadres' training, presented in conceptual and theoretical terms, being a sociological interpretation of the literary text. The purpose of this dual style is to assure popular comprehension of analytical messages and to raise levels of consciousness. The 'double history' is now

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amply utilised by people concerned with progress and development on the Atlantic Coast and elsewhere.

Another recent attempt has involved the comparative field approach with PAR. This had never been done until 1982 when teams of researchers applied the same frame of reference in their respective countries (Nicaragua, Colombia and Mexico) among tri-racial rural communities. This effort, under the sponsorship of the International Labour Office (Employment and Development Department, Geneva) was published in book form (Fals-Borda 1985) with the title, *Conocimiento y poder popular: Lecciones con campesinos de Nicaragua, Colombia y México* (Knowledge and People's Power: Lessons with peasants in Nicaragua, Colombia and Mexico). (An English version is being published by The Indian Social Institute, New Delhi.)

The coastal IDRC research as well as the comparative ILO study with PAR have helped in clarifying basic methodological and technical issues related to this type of work with and for grassroots units. They confirmed that PAR, as stated above, is not exclusively research oriented, nor only to adult education or political action, but that it encompasses all these aspects as three stages or emphases not necessarily consecutively. They are combined into an experiential methodology, a process of personal and collective behaviour occurring within a satisfying and productive cycle of life and labour. This experiential methodology for life and labour implies the acquisition of serious and reliable knowledge upon which to construct power for the poor and exploited social groups and their authentic organisations. In this connection, *people's power* may be defined as the capacity of the grass-roots groups, which are exploited socially and economically, to articulate and systematise knowledge (both their own and that which comes from outside) in such a way that they can become protagonists in the advancement of their society and in defence of their own class and group interests.

The aims of this combination of knowledge and power are: 1) to enable the oppressed groups and classes to acquire sufficient creative and transforming leverage as expressed in specific projects, acts and struggles; and 2) to produce and develop socio-political thought processes with which popular bases can identify. The evaluation of these aims is done in practice by examining the results obtained in PAR projects, not by abstract reasoning or rules.

It is obvious that these aims go beyond the academic traditions which have emphasised value neutrality and a positivist objectivity as prerequisites for 'serious science'. PAR does not negate the need for discipline and continuity in accumulating and systematising knowledge, and it hopes to draw such qualities from academe. However, it would induce a reorientation in teleological terms that would lead into more integrated academic and popular, or common-sensical, knowledges so that a new type of 'revolutionary science' (in Kuhnian terms) becomes a real possibility, not only a felt necessity. As this is still in the making, the polemical nature of such a possibility is readily granted, and it is hoped that everyone involved will be able to profit from it intellectually and humanly.

Within such polemics and limitations, the application of this methodology for productive life and labour in Mexican, Nicaraguan and Colombian rural communities in recent years has allowed progress to be made in the examinations of two important theoretical problems: 1) the implications that the perception of reality and the contemporary world have on personal and collective *everyday behaviour*; and 2) the effects which the people's conscious struggle may have on improving existing standards of life and labour; and in order to accomplish, defend and promote revolutionary changes in society through internal and external mechanisms of *countervailing power* exercised against exploitative systems.

Obviously, distinctions must be taken into account between the revolutionary condition of Nicaragua and the 'representative democracies' of Mexico and Colombia, even though these 'democratic' systems are in crisis. The PAR approach has proved to be supportive of the Nicaraguan Revolution, an indication that the latter's cultural, social and economic components have replication and projection value elsewhere in the continent. However timely, this is not a new discovery, but the recent shared experience with PAR in the three countries (and elsewhere) underlines the importance of two broad lessons concerning the establishment and exercise of people's power in fieldwork and adult education: 1) how to interact and organise for such purposes; and 2) how to recognise oneself and to learn in such contexts.

At first sight it may appear that there is nothing new in these two lessons. Many observers would claim that such theses are implicit in the current literature on social and economic development, yet there are significant differences in the way the proposed elements of organisation and cognition are conceived in the two approaches of developmentalism and participation as herein presented.

The main difference lies in their ontological conceptions. The developmentalist discourse, as is well known (Foucault's thesis of the archaeology of knowledge can help us in this respect), involves dealing with the concepts of poverty, technology, capital, growth, values, and so forth, as defined from the standpoint of rich, developed countries (where in fact the concept of development was first proposed), a discourse organised into a coherent intellectual whole for the purpose of rationalising and defending the worldwide dominance of those rich and powerful societies.

The participatory discourse or counter-discourse, on the other hand, initiated in the Third World – quite probably as an endogenous dialectical response to the actions of the developed world – postulates an organisation and structure of knowledge in such a way that the dominated, underdeveloped societies articulate their own socio-political position on the basis of their own values and capacities and act accordingly to achieve their liberation from the oppressive and exploitative forms of domination imposed by opulent (capitalist) foreign powers and local consular elites and thus create a more satisfactory life for everyone. In this way a more human *Weltanschauung*, or world outlook, could be fashioned.

This creative balance, or positive confrontation, may be necessary today in order to halt the destructive forces being unleashed in the world, though not of course through the wishes of the poor and the destitute: the arrogant arms race, flagrant injustices, squandering and egotistical oligarchies, monopolistic trends, rampant abuse of nature and man. PAR can make an important contribution in this field in which knowledge and action are combined for social progress.

Participation and organisation

Our first lesson – learning to interact and organise – is based on the existential concept of *vivencia* (experience or *Erlebnis*) proposed by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. Through actual experience of something we intuitively apprehend its essence, we feel, enjoy and understand it as reality, and we thereby place our own being in a wider, more fulfilling context. In PAR such an experience is complemented by another one: that of *authentic commitment* resulting from historical materialism and classical Marxism (Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: ‘Philosophers should not be content with just explaining the world, but should try to transform it’).

This combination of experience and commitment allows us to decide for whom such knowledge is intended: the base groups themselves. Moreover, such a concept of experience recognises that there are two types of animators or agents of change: those which are external and those internal to the exploited classes and units. Such agents are unified in one sole purpose (*telos*), that of achieving the shared goals of social transformation.

Both types of animators (internal and external) contribute their own knowledge, techniques and experiences to the transformation process. Since these elements of knowledge result from different class conformations and rationalities (one Cartesian and academic, the other experiential and practical) a *dialectical tension* is created between them which can be resolved only through practical commitment, that is, through *praxis*. But the sum of knowledge from both types of agents permits the acquisition of a much more accurate and correct picture of the reality which we want to transform. Therefore academic knowledge plus popular knowledge and wisdom may give as a result a total scientific knowledge of a revolutionary nature (and perhaps another paradigm) which destroys the previous unjust class monopoly.

This dialectical tension in praxis leads to the rejection of the asymmetry implied in the subject/object relationship which characterises traditional academic research and most tasks of daily life. According to participatory theory, such a relationship must be transformed into a subject/subject one. Indeed, the destruction of the asymmetric binomial is the kernel of the concept of participation as understood in the present context and in other aspects of the daily routine (family, health, education, politics, etc.).

Thus *to participate* means to break up voluntarily and through experience the asymmetrical relationship of submission and dependence implicit in the subject/object binomial. Such is its authentic essence.

Let us review one example from fieldwork related to these concepts. The Co-ordination Commission of El Regadio (Nicaragua), which was set up at the beginning of our experience, had to become fully acquainted with the research, ensure that the census of the community was properly carried out and help in the analysis and correction of its results. The researchers noted, however, that the members of the Commission began to complain of headaches, backaches, stiff necks, etc. precisely when greater intellectual reflection was required. The latent intention was that the external animators should give the 'correct answers'. As they did not lend themselves to such purposes, tense moments of silence arose as the members of the Commission waited for the answer, or indulged in trivial conversation and jokes.

If they had adopted other guidelines on research and action, our researchers could easily have assumed the role of these indispensable leaders 'normally' expected by the peasants of El Regadio. However, the animators insisted that the peasants should analyse their own patterns of dependency, authoritarianism and paternalism inherited from the traditional exploitation systems of the past which continued to flourish there despite the revolution of 19 July 1979. Together with the results of the census, this historical and social self-analysis offered the community another excellent opportunity to take a look at itself. It was the first time that the inhabitants had done this, and so their history 'acquired a face of its own' in a process similar to that which had occurred among the Otomis of El Mezquital (Mexico). In this way the process of change in El Regadio became more dynamic and the people could undertake new tasks for their own development with more effectiveness and confidence.

If the old habits of submission and dependency had not been broken in El Regadio, the community census would have failed because the interviewees would have given false answers. Resistance and suspicion disappeared when it was seen that the interviewers themselves were from the community and were trained *in situ* by the animators (using 'socio-dramas' among other techniques), thus establishing a direct subject to subject relationship. 'If people from other places had come to do it, the investigation would have failed because there are persons here who believe that most outsiders come just to steal', the Commission rightly concluded.

In the case of Nicaragua there was no difficulty in training community cadres and interviewers in *simple methods* of registering, counting, systematisation and data analysis. Thus the concept of 'research' was demythologised. It was no longer seen as something magical or difficult, as if it were an exclusive monopoly of 'experts' and 'academics'. The demystification of research and its replacement by subject-to-subject analysis also occurred in Puerto Tejada (Colombia) when the housing conditions of the poor were examined. This process strengthened the confidence of the communities to get on with the task of asserting their claims. Nevertheless, care had to be taken that the newly trained cadres did not adopt the superior attitudes of exploitation and allow themselves to become pivotal men, just because of the

training which they had received and which, in one way or another, made them different from the rest. When this selective training was not done carefully, its results were counter-productive.

Obviously not everything which goes by the name of participation today is in fact of a participatory nature. There are voluntary and vertically imposed aspects of this process which should be taken into account in present-day processes of political and social action. In particular, national and international politicians have been prone to base their philosophy of popular participation on Samuel Huntington's limited definition of it as 'acts affecting governmental decision-making' (Huntington and Nelson 1976). Of course, this is not participation at all according to PAR standards (since it is not the government which is the final referent, but the peoples themselves), a fact which is recognised by critical political scientists such as Seligson and Booth (1979) and Gran (1983), who admit the real-life complexities of the participatory process.

Neither is Jaroslav Vanek's 'participatory economy' entirely satisfactory for the Third World peoples (in spite of Vanek's well-intentioned remarks that the powerful may learn 'something fundamentally good' from the poor and weak to achieve 'a better balance of respect among nations'), because his analysis is limited to equilibrium and convergence theories deeply rooted in the developmentalist discourse; the latter is failing precisely because it has achieved only a selective assimilation of what is 'fundamentally good' in the dependent countries (Vanek 1971).

PAR principles on interaction and organisation in praxis lead on to other important consequences, namely, that PAR induces the creation of its own field in order to extend itself in time and space, both horizontally and vertically in communities and regions. It moves from the micro to the macro level and thus acquires a political dimension. The final *evaluation or applied criteria* of the methodology revolve on this political dimension and the opportunity which it offers for making theory concomitant with action.

In addition to the central ideas of culture and ethnicity, special importance is accorded to the concept of *region* (within the context of social formation), as a key element in the PAR interpretation of reality. Exploitative traditional structures are thus better understood, as are the alliances of forces toward revolutionary conjunctures which may be forged under new leadership or by enlightened vanguards. Catalytic external agents play a crucial role in linking up the local dimension to regional and, at a later stage, to the national and the international levels. The particular and the general, social formation and mode of production, may thus be synthesised in this manner.

The open-ended nature of these struggles, as seen in the three countries studied, shows that ebbs and flows are unavoidable because of personal failures by animators and cadres, official repression, internal and external conflicts, ecological rhythms, and lack of material resources. These factors cause the communities to fall victim to the structural violence of the old order (seigneurial or capitalist) of poverty, exploitation, oppression and

dependence. To persist at every level and over the long term is therefore an integral ingredient of PAR, and of the endogenous lesson of the organisation of the popular bases.

Let us see how incipient processes of theorisation and political militancy in our cases have developed and opened up new opportunities for working the resulting countervailing power for base groups in regions.

During a local housing crisis commissions set out from Puerto Tejada (Colombia) to seek the solidarity of neighbouring municipalities. However, the breaking of local boundaries was never so dramatic as on that day when, from the mountains of Cauca and Nariño in the south of the country, an 'Indian march' (of Paeces, Guambianos and Gran Cumbal) arrived with their traditional costumes and flutes on their way to Bogotá to denounce the constant persecutions of which they were the victims, and to have the rights of the Indian people respected. The Indians and blacks, in an unusual way, made a sacred pact to fight their common oppression. Everybody in the town came out to receive the visitors with floats, music and dancing, cheering, posters and fireworks. Thus the bases were laid for future investigations and co-ordinated actions by their respective organisations.

The holding of a Regional Assembly was another important step towards further strengthening this encouraging process of internal and external regional relations. Delegates from six different parts of Northern Cauca were present, with their respective studies and papers on local problems. From this Assembly there emerged the first sure indications that it would be possible to establish a regional political movement which would be set within an autochthonous cultural reality.

Meanwhile, the people of Cauca and Valle del Cauca discovered that there were similar independent and critical groups and movements in other Colombian departments (Tolima, Cundinamarca, Cordoba, Sucre, Antioquia and Caqueta). Their first contacts were nervous and unsure. However, little by little relations became warmer among these local groups and movements until they saw that it was both possible and necessary to reach a supra-regional level of activity by establishing the formal bases for a national 'popular movement'. The first convention of this movement took place in Bogotá on 24-25 September 1983, two years after the first local contacts had been established. This 'popular movement' was not born as a political monolith: it has neither hierarchies nor chiefs, but is a pluralist and many-sided body. It has already managed to co-ordinate civic and regional movements at the national level, and has continued to reinforce the same process in cultural, scientific, social, economic, religious and other spheres. It is hoped that by maintaining their autonomy and leadership these movements would coalesce towards the common political goal of achieving substantial changes in the fabric of Colombian society.

It is significant that in Colombia this process has led to the organisation of a movement rather than a political party as such, and that the procedure adopted has been *from the bases upwards* and from the periphery towards the

centre, rather than the contrary, as has usually been the case with traditional parties, including those of the left. There was resistance on the part of local groups to 'founding a party', something which they had seen fail so many times before in regional capitals through decisions taken by intellectuals cut off from the bases. Any eventual party was seen more as a result of the process and work with the bases rather than an imposing guide to carry out the tasks in hand.

Upholding the organisational and interactive efforts of PAR – the mechanisms of people's countervailing power – can also reach the international level. Indeed, there already exist in several world capitals important support institutions for this type of work and which are responding to this special (and perhaps unexpected) challenge from the Third World. They are non-governmental organisations, private foundations, sympathetic ministries, ecclesiastical bodies, alert United Nations agencies whose positive support calls for an awareness on the part of participatory researchers to preserve the freshness of the PAR approach as an original input from the world periphery.

Moreover, many writers and thinkers from the dominant countries are also responding to the need to understand these new intellectual and political trends which are coming from the world periphery and harmonise them with their own schemes of explanation and action. Hence the contributions of work on historical economic theory (Feder 1976; Frank 1978; Barraclough 1982); the countercurrents in the sciences (Capra 1983; Berman 1981; Nowotny 1978); the new emphasis on political processes from the bottom up (Gran 1983; Wolfe 1981; Pitt 1976; Galtung 1980; Castells 1985); critical epistemology (Oquist 1978; Moser 1982); applied hermeneutics (Himmelstrand 1978); radical adult education (Hall 1977; de Schutter 1981; Swantz 1980); problem-oriented social science (Pearse 1980; Taussig 1986; Comstock 1982; Goulet 1977); and the convergent work on social intervention and action (Touraine 1978) as well as on world systems versus dependence theories (Wallerstein 1979; Seers 1981).

Perhaps we have all been drawing closer, each in his or her own way in the face of the scientific, political and moral crisis facing the world today, towards the expression of a new kind of socio-political discourse based on revalued concepts such as participation, endogenesis, regionality, and power as we have tried to define them in this study and which would replace and supersede the current concepts of development, underdevelopment, integrated rural development, nationality, and growth per se, that is the concepts which have dominated international literature since at least 1949 in support of the views from rich countries, but which are now in crisis.

Techniques for knowledge and power

The second lesson – which proposes the experiences of learning to know and recognise ourselves as a means of creating people's power – has a certain phenomenological basis.

It starts with the thesis that science is not a fetish with a life of its own or something which has an absolute value. As amply demonstrated, science is a cultural product with specific human purposes and implicitly carries those class biases and values which scientists hold as a group. It therefore favours those who produce and control it, although its present institutionalised development may in fact be developing into a phase threatening humanity. For this reason it is theoretically possible to conceive of alternative ways of science, such as a people's science to exist as an endogenous process. People's science may be formally constructed in its own terms, and perhaps it could serve as a corrective to certain destructive tendencies of the predominant inhuman forms of science. The knowledge thus acquired, properly systematised, would serve the interests of the exploited classes. This people's science would converge with the so-called 'universal science' of academe to the point where a totalising paradigm would be created which would incorporate the newly acquired systematised knowledge.

Under these conditions, it is obvious that *forms and relationships of knowledge production* should have as much, or even more, value than forms and relationships of material production. As Md. Anisur Rahman (1985) has pointed out, the elimination of exploitation patterns at the material or infrastructural level of a society does not assure, by itself, that the general system of exploitation has been destroyed or that poverty, ignorance, and injustice have been overcome. It becomes necessary to eliminate also the relationship governing the production of knowledge, production which tends to give ideological support to injustice, oppression and the destructive forces which characterise the modern world. It is only in this manner that the classic Baconian axiom, 'Knowledge is power' can be fully understood; and when the exploited classes require such an understanding that they take a decisive step not only towards their own liberation, but towards that of the other social classes threatened with global destruction.

This creative process of responsible all-embracing and useful knowledge-making does not take as its point of insertion the pedagogical method implied in the early Freire treatises but dialogical research oriented to the social situation in which people live. For this reason, it begins with the question 'Why is there poverty?' the answer to which may lead simultaneously to greater awareness, social research and political praxis.

Ideally in such cases the grass-roots and their cadres should be able to participate in the research process from the very beginning, that is from the moment it is decided what the subject of research will be. And they should remain involved at every step of the process until the publication of results and the various forms of returning the knowledge to the people are completed.

As has been done in practice, such a participatory task gives precedence to qualitative rather than quantitative analysis, without losing sight of the importance of explanatory scientific schemas of cause-and-effect. In this realm, participatory researchers have faced the dilemmas of employing affective logic involving the heart versus dialectical logic with cold-headed

laboratory analysis. As a rule we have followed Pascal's dictum, 'The heart has its *reasons* which the reason does not at all perceive', much as in William Bateson's ideal that scientific work can reach its highest point when it aspires to art (cf. Berman 1981 : 197). If emotion and reason have their own precise algorithms, their discovery is not beyond human efforts as has been done with musical logic, for example, and with men of letters and aesthetes who have been able 'to think with the heart' (Hofmannsthal, Gide, Mann), a possibility recognised for the sciences (and practised) by Einstein, Russell and Whitehead (*Principia Mathematica*), among others.

With these general objectives in mind, we found that our Mexico, Nicaragua and Colombia experiences indicated that the following *techniques* resulting from the practice of PAR are useful in the establishment of people's countervailing power and in aiding adult education.

1. *Collective research*. This is the systematic use of information collected and systematised on a group basis, as a source of data and objective knowledge of facts resulting from meetings, socio-dramas, public assemblies, committees, fact-finding trips, etc. This collective and dialogical method not only produces data which may be immediately corrected or verified but also provides a social validation of objective knowledge which cannot be achieved through individual methods based on surveys or field work. In this way confirmation is obtained of the positive values of dialogue, discussion, argumentation and consensus in the objective investigation of social realities.

Let us give some illustrations of this technique.

People's assemblies in Puerto Tejada were held at least twenty times. They became a sort of social arena in which the people discovered themselves and their history. There were several modes in such collective recognition: 1) that of individuals as acting and thinking people; 2) the past in relation to the present; 3) the legitimacy of the struggle to destroy the bourgeois values of crime and sin; 4) the causes of injustice and exploitation and the identification of those responsible; 5) the people's capacity to decide, act and transform themselves collectively.

The assemblies became a sort of 'public trial' in which the people acted as judge and where the proceedings concerned the reasons for injustice. Evidence was presented to the assemblies in the form of witness accounts, documents, technical opinion from friendly experts, etc. on the basis of which the sugar planters were indicted and ordered to return the land they had abusively taken. In this dynamic way the people of Puerto Tejada took over for themselves a well-known bourgeois ritual and gave it a different meaning and content.

The combination of study and practice, when done in this collective and dialogical way, implies the idea of a service to the community. It is altruistic knowledge. Thus in El Mezquital the inhabitants hoped that the outside investigators 'would show the people how their training could be applied to the problems of real life'. This expectation was closely connected with the Indian communal tradition. In this way the periodicity of meetings increased;

communal first-aid kits, maize mills, and family kitchen gardens were established; defective wells were repaired; buildings were roofed and pine trees planted in school yards.

The same effects, at another level, were seen in the 'census data socialisation' meetings which took place in El Regadio. Through comments and analysis at these meetings the people not only corrected the data and filled in the gaps (they knew each other quite well) but also gave meaning to the collected information, so that the successive steps of the economic and political development of this region could then be established (see Fals-Borda 1985 for details of this process).

The final work on the local history of El Cerrito (Colombia) was another collective experience which was indispensable for the proper completion of the task. All the inhabitants were summoned to listen to the first draft of the text. It was there – with some persons answering, others correcting – that the final orderly and polished text emerged and which was then sent to the printers as part of the local PAR experience.

2. *Critical recovery of history.* This is an effort to discover selectively, through collective memory, those elements of the past which proved useful in the defence of the interests of exploited classes, and which proved useful and which may be applied to the present struggles to increase awareness. Use is thus made of oral tradition, in the form of interviews and witness accounts by older members of the community possessing good analytical memories; the search for concrete information on given periods of the past kept in family coffers; data columns and popular stories; by ideological projections, imputation, personification and other techniques designed to stimulate the collective memory. In this way folk heroes, data and facts were discovered which corrected, complemented or clarified official or academic accounts written with other class interests or biases in mind. Or completely new and fresh information was discovered and which was of major importance to regional and national history, all with the purpose of upholding people's power.

In the case of Puerto Tejada, pertinent historical results became quickly evident. The first attempts at critical recollection during the communal forum saw the re-emergence of an ideal of freedom dating back to the time of the courageous runaway black slaves who had colonised the neighbouring region of La Perezosa on the Palo river. It was a recollection which had been repressed by subsequent exploitation, when the whites established their cattle ranches and extended them by violence, destroying the free black villages which had thrived in that region.

But the feeling of being free, which had characterised the old Palo villages, re-emerged in unexpected ways during the forum. It was as if a sleeping volcano had suddenly become active. Some elders recalled the life of authentic heroes of the region like Crucito (a local Robin Hood), Fidel and José Ignacio Mina (Sinecio), Sixto and Ciro Biáfara, and Natanael Diaz. They had been exceptional crusaders who had fought since the beginning of the present

century with their black groups for the possession of lands which the estate owners still wanted to wrest from the people. They were indeed real men who knew how to value their freedom! By comparison, the present situation of town life was hateful and incomprehensible. Critical collective memory called for something more concrete to be done to correct such injustices, because if their grandparents had been able to fight the 'whites' before with relative success, why could they not also? History thus gained a new meaning from these new glimpses of truth and power, namely that not only could the facts be remembered, but that they could also be converted into a catapult for a better communal life.

The free settlement of the former slaves thus emerged from the past and became an ideal of freedom for the entire Northern Cauca. This was not all. As cocoa had been the principal product for trade and economic survival during that heroic period, the plant became the local symbol of freedom. At the same time, its historical counter-symbol clearly emerged in dialectical opposition: the sugar cane as a sign of evil, represented by the plantation owners who were destroying the traditional ways of life by taking over the land of the peasants.

In the same fashion, Don Silvestre in El Cerrito (Colombia), together with other elders, became one of the few sources of trustworthy historical facts about the region. His inimitable stories explained how the village was founded on the shores of a lagoon, with recognised legal rights to the use of the fertile plains in which staple crops were grown. Formal law protected the peasants, although it was constantly ignored by the powerful land-owners of Coardoba whose aim was to increase their herds selfishly. They wanted the same territory as the peasants.

The struggle had begun decades ago, towards the end of the last century and the beginning of the present century. Its sparks did not spare the new hamlet of El Cerrito. It was history which had been forgotten and buried, until 1972 when a piece of participatory research was carried out with the then powerful peasant movement. Some of the heroes and heroines who had defended the interests of the working classes during the 1920s, were fortunately still alive: Juana Julia Guzmán among others, now old, poor and sick. She had worked shoulder to shoulder since 1918 with Vicente Adamo, an immigrant Italian labourer who organised the first workers' struggles in Monteria and its surrounding districts.

Juana Julia held the key to the critical, untapped historical knowledge of those years. She had not wanted to share it with local conservative or liberal politicians who constantly urged her to tell her story. She only relented when she saw that her own class had re-emerged in the peasant movement which had inspired her in her youth and took part herself in the new struggle, attending meetings and assemblies along with the others. Juana Julia's presence in the peasant meetings was like seeing history in the flesh. In these special circumstances her word carried the additional magic of real experience and the weight of the exciting experiment which had defeated the land-owners of the coast for the first time. In the same way, it can be said that the rediscovery of

Juana Julia (and other contemporary figures) was one of the ideological factors which most stimulated the struggle for land between 1970 and 1976 in Córdoba. The legal possession of the marshes and lagoons by the people was at last established in El Cerrito through pressure from the peasants on the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA).

Another advantage gained from the 'recovery' of Juana Julia Guzmán was that she also opened the coffers where she kept the material souvenirs of her past struggles. In spite of the ravages of time and damp, they contained the first treasures of a genuine people's museum, like the silk armbands with the 'three eights' (a socialist aspiration of the period), pictures of Adamo, the Monteria Workers' House, the first public hospital, members of the first organised trade-unions. They were indispensable elements (we call them 'data columns') to understand past events, the antecedents of the present struggle carried on by the grandchildren of those who figured in the old yellow documents or in the faded photographs of an epoch resurrected from the past in these family coffers.

All this systematic research activity carried out in collaboration with the local people – with data columns, the recovery of popular figures and heroes, ideological projections, imputations, and personifications – took place outside academic institutions. Official and academic historians had completely ignored the existence of Vicente Adamo and the socialist workers' organisations of the 1920s. But this grass-roots corrector of official history completed and illustrated it in a critical manner, putting it to the service of poor people so that they too could acquire a respectable identity and a collective ego through the recognition of their tradition and their own history. The PAR ideal of opening new ideological and scientific perspectives of popular origin in the Atlantic coast of Colombia was thus fulfilled. The same happened in Mexico and Nicaragua.

3. *Valuing and applying folk culture.* In order to mobilise the masses, this technique is based upon the recognition of essential or core values among the peoples in each region. This allows account to be taken of cultural and ethnic elements frequently ignored in regular political practice, such as art, music, drama, sports, beliefs, myths, story-telling, and other expressions related to human sentiment, imagination, and ludic or recreational tendencies.

Two social groups have distinguished themselves in Nicaragua by their enthusiastic and loyal dedication to the onerous revolutionary tasks: women and young teachers, that is, those young people with a minimum level of education and who have only recently become literate. This is understandable. They are among the most haunted victims of the economic and social systems which predominate throughout most of the world and who have found, in the revolutionary adventure, a genuine outlet for their creativity hitherto frustrated by injustice, exploitation and prejudice.

In El Regadio women were considered dolls, good for making tortillas and cooking beans. Hardly anyone recognised their important role as 'anchors' in society, although they were the centre and often the main support for their

families. But with the revolution, women found in the educational committees (CEP) a way of leaving home and kitchen. They discovered how to break their routine and organise themselves to defend their interests. They began to speak about less trivial matters and to seek ways of overcoming existing poverty. Their task was how to transform the CEPs into something more productive, such as a useful sewing class, for example, and from there to proceed to the acquisition of a sewing machine which the community would share. Debates of this kind could finish in 'subversive' talk, as happened with the subject of machismo in public dances. How was it that married men, but not married women, could go alone to these dances? Armed with this dynamic and critical approach to such double moral standards, Nicaraguan peasant women became a motor for social and revolutionary change, and displayed an almost monopolistic activism in the new processes.

For their part, recently literate young Nicaraguans have experienced a spiritual elation which has made them more altruistic than before. They dedicate themselves to the educational campaigns with 'body and soul'. For them, there are no fixed timetables nor family duties. Their spirit of sacrifice is absolute and they are the driving force of the revolutionary wheel. A temptation to which they are sometimes exposed is to make pupils feel the weight of their newly found knowledge – their newly acquired authority as teacher of the people – and to become somewhat domineering.

However, in this they are simply imitating the oppressive educational models which they had seen applied before in the local school or nearest village. In such cases they fail to break the subject/object binomial and prefer to bully adult pupils who cannot understand, let us say, what the dactylic stress is. But imagination can come quickly to their aid, by recourse to shared experiences. Then they can explain that the dactylic stress in any given word is like a 'triple play' in baseball. Everyone can understand this and proceed to the next lesson.

Through such *feelings* it is possible to understand the primal forces of people's culture and symbols. They are like an affective logic. In Puerto Tejada, when he spoke of the historical origins of the enclosures of the runaway slaves of the Palo river, Ño Didacio expressed the same idea: 'Negro culture is not just a culture of evocation; it is not a question of memory but of feelings'. His sentiments led him to revive the old 'dance of the knives', a half-dead musical folk expression the meaning of which could only be recaptured in the mobilising context of the People's Civic Movement of Northern Cauca, with its challenge to the municipal bosses. Through the importance which it attached to local culture in this way, the movement experienced the greatest political gains of its short history. It had managed to give voice to the soul of the people.

Another important popular recreative expression which is recoverable for action through research – at least among the coastal people of Colombia – is that of *story-telling*: tales, legends, parables, fables, anecdotes, riddles and puns. Even refined gossip, viewed as information, may be useful as a means of

positive mobilisation. All these elements of oral culture may be exploited as a new and dynamic political language which belongs to the people, as we saw in El Cerrito and Puerto Tejada, especially those forms which already contain an implicit protest intention. This is the case for example with the well-known tales of 'Uncle Tiger and Uncle Rabbit' which narrate the impudence and skills of a defenceless little animal (the peasant) confronted with a dangerous beast (the boss) and which display a powerful sense of latent resistance against the injustices which characterise the production relationship. On the Colombian coast (as in other regions), story-telling and other expressions of oral tradition are among the most effective ways for keeping alive the people's culture and their core values. Story-telling refuses to die because, if it did, the peasant people would die with it.

These cultural processes operating within the heart of the community are an active force which allows the knowledge of the people to ferment in a vast cauldron or melting pot, and build up the incredible resources of resistance which characterise the popular struggles in the three countries.

Feelings, imagination and the sense of play are apparently inexhaustible sources of strength and resistance among the people. These three elements have a common basis which cannot be ignored in the struggle to promote mobilisation and people's power in our countries: religious beliefs. Here are some examples.

The death of a child during the invasion of the sugar plantation outside Puerto Tejada and the bravery of its mother – together with the practices and beliefs implicit during the funeral wake – were events which stopped the army in its tracks when soldiers attempted to occupy and burn the huts of the new district. The spectre of the 'little angel' lying dead and the hypnotic rhythm of the *alabao* (ritual music), more than the presence of the national flag which had been hoisted there, made the troops respect the invasion.

A witch added his secret power to the fight against a land-owner who did not want to give up his excess land to the peasants of Córdoba. The witch's services must have been effective judging by the eventual success, and his support had an important moral and psychological effect among the popular masses. Another witch is still being consulted in Villapaz, not far from Puerto Tejada, to see if the course of a river can be changed so as to recuperate public land and avoid floods, which are the objectives of a new local civic movement.

Something similar can be said with regard to health protection practices based on the knowledge of medicine-men and herbalists in the peasant communities of the three countries. These are serious and systematic classificatory practices, as can be seen in Ixmiquilpan and other Otomi settlements in the valley of El Mezquital. Such revaluation endeavours have had an extraordinary effect on Otomi peasant behaviour and on their campaigns to defend their economic and cultural heritage. The same can be said for San Agustín Atenango (Mexico) where the community 'doctor', the dispenser of the empirical scientific knowledge which he holds as *Tata Yiva*, or 'lord of the powers', is the permanent guardian of the core values of his ancient community.

All this and much more can and should be examined and better understood with a view to establishing countervailing action. If the basic culture and values of the peasants are selectively harnessed to the popular struggle, and if negative alienation is properly contained, an unconquerable force is thus created which would lead to the establishment of an authentic and deep-rooted people's power based on imagination and feelings, capable of transforming unjust structures of the dominant society.

4. *Production and diffusion of new knowledge.* This technique is an integral part of the research process because it is a central part of the feedback and evaluative objective of PAR. It recognises a division of labour among and within base groups. Although PAR strives to end the monopoly of the written word (which as a rule is an elitist phenomenon), it incorporates various styles and procedures for systematising new data and knowledge according to the level of political conscience and ability for understanding written, oral or visual messages by the base groups and public in general.

Four levels of communication are established depending on whether the message and systematised knowledge are addressed to preliterate peoples, cadres and intellectuals. They require that a good PAR researcher should learn to address all four levels with the same message in the different styles required, if he or she is to be really effective in the written, auditory or visual communication of the thought or message. Nevertheless the actual need for articulating abstract theory and concepts is still retained for level four. This carries the danger that intellectuals hold onto their traditional monopoly and dominance unless they become truly organic with the people and acknowledge their real commitment to base groups and their struggles.

Other efficient forms of communication based on a 'total' or intentional language include the use of image, sound, painting, gestures, mime, photographs, radio programmes, popular theatre, video-tapes, audio-visual material, poetry, music, puppets and exhibitions. Finally, material forms of organisation and economic and social action by base groups, such as in the organisation of cooperatives, trade-unions, leagues, cultural centres, action units, workshops, training centres, etc. as a result of pertinent studies carried out.

There is an obligation to return this knowledge systematically to the communities and workers' organisations because they continue to be its owners. They may determine the priorities concerning its use and authorise and establish the conditions for its publication and dissemination.

This systematic devolution of knowledge complies with Gramsci's objective of transforming 'common' sense into 'good' sense or critical knowledge ('revolutionary science' as a new paradigm) which would be the sum of experiential and theoretical knowledge. It thus transcends Mao Tse-Tung's principle of 'from the masses to the masses' in that it recognises the capacity of the masses to systematise the data discovered, that is, to participate fully in the entire process, with their own organic intellectuals from the beginning to the end.

To succeed in these endeavours requires a shared code of communication between internal elements and external agents of change which leads to a common and mutually understandable conceptualisation and categorisation. The resulting plain and understandable language should be based on daily intentional expressions and be accessible to all, avoiding the airs of arrogance and the technical jargon that spring from usual academic and political practices, including ideological elements from the current (and increasingly discredited) developmentalist discourse.

These PAR techniques do not exclude a flexible use of other practices deriving from sociological and anthropological tradition such as the open interview (avoiding any excessively rigid structure), census or simple survey (on rare occasions mail questionnaires), direct systematic observation (with personal participation and selective experimentation), field diaries, data filing, photography, cartography, statistics, sound recordings, primary and secondary source materials, notarial, regional and national archives. Cadres ('resource persons') should not only be equipped to handle these orthodox techniques responsibly but also know how to popularise them by teaching the activists simpler, more economic and controllable methods of research, so that they can carry on their work without being dependent on intellectuals or external agents of change and their costly equipment and procedures.

Thus with all these ways and techniques, advancement and transformation of oppressed peoples can be made possible in several applied fields: in adult education, in political and civic action, in socio-economic advancement, and other types of fieldwork. Additional current experiences are enriching this approach and challenging non-committed academic ways in established institutions. In this manner perhaps PAR may contribute to help build a better world for everybody with justice and peace.

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