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THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

The law condemns the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater felon loose
Who steals the common from the goose

18'th Century English Rhyme

For the colonized person, objectivity is always directed against her.

Franz Fanon

When it comes time for the oracle of the academic discourse to deliver the message, we find that the academic has not delivered the oracle...the oracle has delivered the academic.

Anthony Wilden

Context

It is helpful for our understanding of politically important discussions to understand the context or the positioning of the writer within some kinds of social, personal and historical frameworks. I have lost patience for decontextualized writing and feel that we will save time in real debates by providing some personal information at the beginning.

In the early 1970's I was the Director of Research in the Institute of Adult Education in Tanzania. I was active in carrying out research which became increasingly participatory in nature. I met Paulo Freire at the time who confirmed our interests. I worked with an outstanding group of Tanzanians who influenced me including Kemal Mustapha and Deborah Bryceson.

Together with Ted Jackson, dian marino of Canada, John Gaventa of the USA, Francisco Vio Grossi of Chile, Yusuf Kassam of Tanzania, Rajesh Tandon of India and others, I was involved in the founding of the international participatory research network in 1977. It was founded as part of the International Council for Adult Education.

My role in the participatory research movement has been primarily that of an organizer. I have not been active in an in-depth way

in a participatory research process for 10 years or so. My day to day life now within the International Council for Adult Education is as the head bureaucrat. My daily concerns involve staff recruitment, memos to our members scattered around the world, looking for funds to keep going, finding ways to promote progressive and social movement oriented adult education and trying to keep from being coopted by more powerful interests. I view workshops such as this one and seminars on progressive topics as important sites of struggle for competing visions of the world. I deeply engaged in such long range debates on a wide variety of fronts.

I am when ever possible a continuing student of participatory research and a promoter and propagandist for the movement. I am totally biased towards participatory research and more convinced than ever of its centrality to questions of transformation of power relations.

Three aspects of participatory research

The question of the imperative of participation in research needs to be seen from three equally important aspects or moments. Each of these three moments are in play at the same time and are inter-active.

Ideological - theoretical

Ideological - epistemological

Political practise of participatory research

Ideological-theoretical

The theoretical positioning of participatory research has been a continuing evolution. Participatory research has been a practise which has evolved in various parts of the world out of needs by the popular sectors to use knowledge for transforming purposes. The needs of the popular sectors have met the frustrations of activist/researchers who became disillusioned at various points with the role of their research and the need for broader explanations.

What has emerged as a consensus amongst most working in participatory research is that the goal of theoretical construction is the establishment of a new popular hegemony. That means a theoretical construction which supports practice that empowers and transforms ourselves and our communities.

What kind of transformation? Transformation needs to occur at three levels: economic, ideological and in terms of inter-subjectivity. Our economic structures need to change to that more democratic sharing of wealth and services can take place. Our ideological frameworks need transforming so that genuine democracy can be supported through education, the media and the academic worlds. Our relationships with people, our inter-subjectivity needs to be transformed regarding relationships between women and men, as well as entrenched patterns of racism, and ageism.

We have been deeply influenced by historical materialist work, both old and new. The Marxist notion that it is the ruling classes which control ideas rather than ideas which control the ruling classes is clear to all those who work with the marginal be they illiterates, homeless or jobless. Since the late 1970's Gramsci's concerns with the role of organic intellectuals and the task of reconstructing civil society...the building up of counter-hegemonic practices has been supportive.

Within the walls of academe, the Habermas critique of "scientism", the 20'th century theoretical tool of oppression has been useful to many of us.

Orlando Fals Borda, the Colombian activist/intellectual and current President of the Latin American Council for Adult Education (CEAAL) has done as much as any single person to develop our theoretical constructs.

From a paper of his on Science and Common People,

In the first place, we shall not make of science a fetish, as if it were an entity with life of its own, capable of ruling the universe and of determining the form and context of our society, both present and future. Let us keep in mind that, far from being such a monstrous agent of science-fiction, science itself is only a cultural product of human intellect which responds to concrete collective needs-including those considered artistic, supernatural and extrascientific - and also to specific objectives determined by the predominant social classes with in certain historical periods. Science is constructed by applying rules, methods and techniques subject to a certain type of rationality conventionally accepted by a minority community constituted by human persons called the scientists who, for being human, they are precisely subject to motivations, interests, beliefs and superstitions, emotions and interpretations of their specific social development.

The community of Western specialized scientists nowadays monopolizes the concept of what science is.

Social science, being the application of science to the problems of people, is still more deeply touched by the economic forces of everyday life. How nice it would be to be able really to say that social science or science were above us all...neutral factors is our day to day lives. Alas, they exist in the all too familiar real world of power, economic control, competing interests and gender relations wherein everything else including our most private lives lies.

Ideological - Epistemological

The principle concern of participatory research is with the production of transformative knowledge. Participatory research is most often described as a process which combines research, education and action. That description offers an insight into the epistemological underpinings of this work to date.

Our understanding of the epistemology of participatory research derive again from our practice. Each of us has come to the realization that hitherto accepted knowledge is faulty, oppressive or manipulative from different practices. Each of these differences has added to our understanding of how knowledge is constructed. We have become aware that there are many different ways of knowing.

A Third-World perspective

Fals Borda talks of the domination by western social science of the "rules of the game" in research. Most activist researchers have come face-to-face when working outside the dominant Northern cultures of the bias of western methods of knowledge production. Many of the social science tools have been seen to be alienating, anti-social and inaccurate when used in countries of the Third world or indeed in dominated parts of countries such as Canada.

Paulo Freire with his ideas of thematic investigation, Gerace and his notions of horizontal communications, Fals Borda and participatory action research, Miguel and Rosiska D'arcy de Oleviera and militant investigation have all contributed. The actual term participatory research was first used in Tanzania by Marja Lise Swantz and a group of researchers there.

A Feminist Perspective

Dorothy Smith of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has written eloquently of the exclusion of women from sociology. She and others have been part of feminist critique and reconstruction of the way in which knowledge works to the detriment of women. It has become clear from a remarkable creative explosion since the early 1970's that there is a woman's way of knowing that is different from a man's.

An early paper by Helga Jacobsen of the Women's Research Centre in Vancouver entitled "How to Study your own Community: Research from the Perspective of Women" influenced many of us a great deal.

A Native Perspective

Others such as Ted Jackson, Grace Hudson and Bill Sinnawap have reminded us that our original people in Canada and elsewhere have developed different ways of knowing based on their unique relationships with the land and with oppressive dominant cultures. From their point of silence they have learned to speak in different ways. To work on behalf of these people is to work in ways that hear the silences as much as the sounds. Their control, their visions, their dreams must result from a knowledge that is theirs.

A Worker's Perspective

When the poultry worker's union in Montreal wanted to know about the impact of work place conditions on the health of women workers, they didn't ask for an arm's length expert to study the literature on occupational health. They asked Donna Murgler of the University of Montreal to work with teams of workers to study what was happening to them. Why? They did this because no one understood the detailed way in which the environment in the workplace effected them better than the women who were there on a day to day basis. Yet again it was clear that there is a different way of knowing, a different set of epistemological assumptions, which intuitively guide these workers.

These examples are among thousands of similar "discoveries" which concerned citizens, activist\researchers, women, workers, native people, older people, disabled people or others noted all of which have contributed to wanting to find another way of constructing knowledge.

The Knowledge strategy for social movements

John Gaventa has written about the knowledge strategies for social movements. He notes that social movements have made two previous errors relative to the role of knowledge in their movements.

Many people because of negative experience in schools or in being manipulated by so-called experts reject any attempts to create new forms of knowledge automatically. Research is a bad word, the "R" word, and has no place within organizing and political work.

Others have gone to the other extreme and have taken up the ideas of outside experts because it seemed to be a way of gaining some form of legitimacy vis a vis the authorities. Any expert was better than they were...after all they have been to school and had read a lot of books about the subject.

Both of these errors are found commonly not only within community action movements but even within ourselves. But because of the critical necessity of understanding the knowledge production process (Gaventa reminds us that 50 per cent of U.S. GNP is related to knowledge production), participatory research is becoming critical to the development of new and/or stronger social movements.

Participatory research posits two essentially new ideas for the world of epistemology and social transformation: the incorporation of working class or popular sector women and men in the production of knowledge; and the inclusion of popular knowledge in our accepted concepts of science.

Popular knowledge is the common sense by which we survive. It is folklore, superstition, women's intuition, and it belongs to oppressed people, working people as it has since time began. From the point of view of the Critical Theorists, popular knowledge is the means by which the working class has been able to resist total absorption into dominant ways of thinking. Resistance, the survival and sometimes flourishing of popular culture in the face of structural pressures to conform, is present in schools, in factories, in offices, in Pinochet's Chile, amongst pavement dwellers in Bombay, in university departments, in businesses and in families.

These forms of popular knowledge have remained outside of the formal scientific structure because they are a breach in the rules of who is allowed to create knowledge. Whether knowingly or not the dominant knowledge producers through elaborate systems of credentials (Ph.D.s), language (academic jargon) and patronage (old boy's networks etc) systematically exclude popular knowledge from the realm of acceptability.

Participatory research views knowledge construction as the interaction of popular knowledge articulated by people directly in a process of reflection on action to transform a given reality. In other words if you are happy with things just the way they are, choose another approach!

The political practice of participatory research

Here we find the discussion about methods and the concerns about what does "real" participatory research really look like?

On the question of method, I wish to reiterate what I have said many times over; there is no single method of participatory research. It is a set of principles, a way of interacting and a contribution to social movements in general. Noone will be able to work as a participatory researcher by following a handbook. But at the same time, we can draw on our understanding about how we see knowledge being produced and our experience with various groups over the years to make some suggestions.

Our methods must be conceived in a broad way according to the community, the workplace, the culture, the gender, the class position or class fraction or other similar characteristics. The main idea is that we must listen to people, find ways to work which will allow popular knowledge to be drawn out, made more complex by collective analysis and submitted to the anvil of action for testing. Methods which people have found useful in the past have including open community discussions, forms of discourse analysis, use of drama, use of collective drawing, song-writing, interviews and sometimes even questionnaires when used in collective ways.

In North America we have seen three strategies of participatory research in use generally: research by the people where the object of the research is the reappropriation of knowledge;

research by the people where the object of the research is the creation of people's science; and research where the objective is popular control over a research process where other people are carrying the technical aspects of the research. Obviously the methods have varied greatly depending on the situation.

Joao Francisco de Souza, the current coordinator of the Latin American network of participatory research has outlined the following steps for his work:

1. Context and justification of the research

This refers to who originated the questions, the historical, economic and political context and an understanding of the actors involved.

2. Determination of what knowledge is necessary to transform the situation.

For example when working with homeless people, transformative knowledge could include information of how many people are actually homeless, the actions authorities have already taken to resolve the situation, obstacles to a solution, factors which keep the situation the way it is, potential allies in a political action, and so forth.

3. Determination of whether new knowledge is needed or simple action?

An analysis collectively may at this point lead to another conclusion, namely that enough is known about the situation and that the appropriate steps are now action, not a participatory research process.

4. Defining the categories of analysis

This is most often the juxtaposition of popular knowledge and dominant knowledge. What aspects of the situation need to be known, what are the specific political or strategic hypothesis at work?

5. Engagement in the research process

Carrying out the process in whichever manner the above analysis suggests.

6. Collectivization of the knowledge produced

New knowledge if it is to be empowering for the group must become a part of the group. This may mean public meetings, popularization of results, dramatic presentations or any other method of assuring the appropriation of the new knowledge generated by the people who were the source of the information.

Closing remarks

Participatory research is not something one pulls out of a bag in a given situation and says, "There now, lets give this a try". It is a strategy for social movements, for activist researchers and for persons who are restless or even angry at the status quo. It is not objective, easy to do, inexpensive (in terms of time at least) or even the only "politically correct" way for researchers to intervene socially.

But it has caught the imagination of a large number of activist researchers in scores of countries around the world, it is a valid site of struggle in the larger battles for the control of the world's minds and is making a difference in practical terms in the lives of some people in some places. There is space for your contributions and a need for your visions to build on what we have been working on to date.

Welcome and Thank you.