

A North-South Convergence on the Quest for Meaning

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Personal experience in Latin America led the author from academic work to fieldwork in participatory action research (PAR). This type of research implies a quest for meaning not only in life experiences but also within the intellectual endeavor. A comparison is made between Agnes Heller's version of such a quest and a previous attempt made in Colombia during the period when PAR was being constructed.

"Convergence in knowledge, space, and time" is the main theme of the World Congresses on Participatory Action Research (PAR), Action Research and Process Management, which will be held in Cartagena, Colombia, in June 1997.

Concern with convergence of these types appears to be important for understanding the nature of problems that social science practitioners and others are experiencing everywhere. There is an effort to find more pertinence and usefulness in whatever we do in the academic world as well as in communities, enterprises, schools, and diverse institutions.

Ways of knowing that are coming together from the Northern and Southern hemispheres are interesting in this regard. They will be duly noted in the congresses. To make this experience a fruitful one, it seems appropriate to get acquainted with sources, origins, and itineraries. There is the early case of Agnes Heller and me, as pointed out during the Quality in Human Inquiry Conference held at the University of Bath. Here are the main pertinent facts of this particular intellectual convergence.

My more recent professional evolution may be seen in three periods: (a) field action with grassroots rural communities, 1970-1976; (b) regional immersion and reflection/devolution of knowledge, 1977-1986; and (c) promotion and action with national dominant groups, 1987-1995. This is not the occasion to recount and elaborate on the events of these periods, but it serves to indicate that there was a deep current of commitment with destitute social classes and with the defense of their interests during all these years. However, the decisions pertaining to these activities were never entirely my own. I often felt like I was being swept by conjunctures and by chance, as if there were

some sort of predestination involved. But perhaps my original Presbyterianism is clouding my analytical capacities at this point. It is just a feeling.

The first period involving action with grassroots marks my 20-year defection from positivism and formal academy in search of more satisfactory explanations for the processes and events I was observing or intervening. This was one of the several threads that knitted into PAR as described in the literature. The decision to go to the Atlantic Coast of Colombia for this purpose was then taken by the national peasant movement. This led me to occasional jailings and open conflict with regional vested interests, to successful land seizures by the poor farmers with whom I worked, and to a rudimentary systematization of the knowledge and experience gained in those circumstances. I based it on critical Marxism.

The second period of reflection and devolution of knowledge includes the organization of the First World Symposium of Action Research held in Cartagena in 1977 to study regional problems and reflect on their scientific and practical implications. With a number of colleagues and peasant leaders, we attempted the sharing of life experiences that German thinkers have called *Erfahrung* and we preferred to call *Vivencia*, a Spanish word. A four-volume social history of the Atlantic Coast conceived in two coordinated but differentiated printed columns—one for *mythos* or description with narratives, the other for *logos* or conceptual and theoretical abstraction coordinated with the other column—was published, as well as a series of articles for the national and international communities (I return to this later).

The third period retakes the same action/commitment element of the past, but this time, because of the new positions to which I had acceded, the tasks were directed mainly at dominant and elitist groups. I wanted to raise their level of awareness on the regional socioeconomic problems discovered. This led me to assume certain political leadership that took me to the presidency of an opposition national party and to become a deputy in Colombia's National Constituent Assembly of 1991. Here I advocated participatory, cultural, and pluralist stances and points of view. I also returned to my old post at the National University of Colombia, where in the meantime some favorable changes of leadership and orientation had taken place likewise. Indeed, PAR had started to be respected and co-opted by institutions not only in Colombia but also on a world level.

If one wishes to take stock of this time sequence, one conclusion may be granted: There was some constancy and permanence of intent. The bearings of the grassroots groups involved in our efforts were overpowering in spite of obstacles, which marked a sense of direction and a historical purpose. Participation processes evidently are long range, but certain developments could be readily felt or seen. Certain major achievements could be shown such as the promulgation of the new constitution of the Republic of Colombia, whose foundation is a pluralist, multicultural, and participatory democracy (a goal actually pursued but with the expected pain). Nevertheless, those

peasant, Indian, and Black groups with which I worked first during the 1970s are still in need of more progress and change because they continue to be victims of misguided national and international development policies that have to be somehow deactivated.

Of course, hope is not lost. But I can vouch for at least one clear result of this quarter century of persistence: I, as a professional scientist, learned more than a satisfying alternative research method. I gained most in the realm of attitudes and values such as a philosophy of life that gave new meaning to my acts and permeated my everyday relationships. It was a sense of fulfillment with what I had learned by myself and with my colleagues as well as with the wisdom and know-how of the common peoples with whom I came into contact—methods and attitudes as a coherent way of life that has been useful in my preoccupations and struggles. I am sure this is the same feeling that is shared by all of us who have been working with PAR and its close sisters in many countries, especially those who initiated it in tropical and subtropical regions of the world.

In our case, therefore, the theoretical issues of meaning and feelings for research with action components have come into prime consideration. We have learned that they turn into an existential problem related to answering at least two grand philosophical questions: Knowledge for what? Knowledge for whom?

Not surprisingly, these were the same questions that originated our search for alternatives during the 1970s. But now I believe that, for reasons of accumulation and experience, we should be a little more able to respond to such perennial questions. Since then, I attempted to give answers in two forms.

The first answer was a somewhat complex assessment of the peasant experience of the Atlantic Coast presented at the Cartagena symposium of 1977. This assessment linked the theoretical Marxist approach to the practical need to transform society. Knowledge had to be gained with the participation of marginal and impoverished groups and placed at the service of revolution; such was the critical unacceptable life situation found in rural areas and elsewhere. This first article was published in Spanish the following year in Bogotá, Colombia; in German in Munich, Germany, in 1978; and in English in Stanley Diamond's iconoclastic journal, *Dialectical Anthropology* (Fals-Borda, 1979; Fals-Borda et al., 1978; Moser & Ornaier, 1978).

The second answer was a lecture in Vienna, Austria, organized by the Austrian Association for Political Science, published in the May 1981 issue of the association's journal and titled "Meanings in Social Science and the Practical Production of Knowledge." This article introduced PAR methodology with its general techniques and urged the importance of praxis and personal commitment with local groups. It also opened up the polemics on the political consequences and dimensions of science making; that is, it was an attack on positivism and academic routine. It thus pointed in a suitable

direction for us: toward hermeneutics and the phenomenological school and toward qualitative approaches in the production and diffusion of knowledge.

Successive readings led me then to Gadamer and Husserl, to Berman, Capra, Bateson, Todorov, Geertz, and other illuminating authors, as well as to artistic and literary appreciation as inputs into science. This did not mean discarding quantitative and other formal approaches altogether; the dispensing of *techné* was still considered together with praxis. I also derived theoretical support from pertinent articles in the journal *Theory and Society*. It was then when I discovered Heller's (1989) article titled "From Hermeneutics in Social Science Toward a Hermeneutics of Social Science," which helped me in pinpointing pertinent issues.

In Heller's (1989) brilliant article, I found more than one coincidence with what was going on in the South, and this made me even happier. It is to Heller's "theory of meaning" insinuated in that article that I now wish to turn as a way of illustrating the North-South convergence to which I have already alluded.¹

What I call Heller's theory of meaning is based on her distinction between truth and true knowledge as verisimilitude. The following is a short summary. Meaning is "wrung out of" true knowledge whose criteria are needed to understand and interpret facts and processes in social sciences. Understanding is "making sense" of something for the objects of an inquiry such as testimonies of witnesses, alive or dead, to gather the meanings of actions in their contexts and to arrange possibilities for quasi-facts. The practical implications of this theory are critical. Moreover, Heller (1989) wishes to challenge the social sciences to keep their promise of certitude and self-knowledge as "the result of a new, rationalist quest for meaning," which would lead "to transform our contingency into our destiny as modern society and set us free."

Such an unusual combination of the ideal and the practical, the feeling and the distance, the heart and the head is in the essence of PAR problematics. It is an emancipatory type of phenomenology in which we can see Southern concerns meeting Northern intellectual thought so that we could keep on walking together. Therefore, as a voice from the South, I attempt to specify certain convergences with Heller's theory of meaning as a clarifying act. (Quotations are verbatim in both columns; numbers refer to pages in each reference.)

PAR Life Experiences in Colombia
(Fals-Borda, 1979 [I], 1981 [II], 1987
[III]; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991 [IV])

Insertion in Heller's Theory of Meaning
(Heller, 1989)

1. *Purpose of inquiry and its
epistemological roots*

The purpose is to transform society
radically through knowledge/action

The purpose is to make sense of
human affairs, manifestations,

for justice, equity, and freedom, especially for the benefit of those social classes that are exploited, destitute, or oppressed, and to give them a proper exercise of power (III, p. 331). Science is related to political action by means of a radical praxis (I, p. 37). Roots are found in the phenomenological school and hermeneutics with prevalence for qualitative and descriptive techniques such as open interviews, diaries, photographs, maps, and archival materials, especially private. (III, p. 330)

There is no final history. Alternative narratives should be found in subordinate groups. There is an obligation to communicate such versions (II, p. 56).

There are two central orientations: *Vivencia* (life experience, *Erfahrung*) and *commitment* with change processes and their actors (praxis) (III, p. 332). These orientations determine the nature and success of fieldwork, especially in conflict-ridden situations. Knowledge and understanding derived from these orientations should be both valid and useful (I, p. 40; IV, p. 158).

actions, creations, institutions, and so on to obtain true knowledge for the objects of inquiry. This is the norm of justice in the social sciences (p. 306). Truth is revealed when knowledge proved by social science affects the very existence of people or human groups (their prospects, hopes, fears, experiences, and daily practices), opens up new expectations, elevates or humiliates, or changes human lives (p. 313). A person aware of his or her contingency can still try to transform this contingency into his or her destiny (p. 321).

There is a pluralism of interpretation; there can be more than one good theory about the same social phenomenon. When a theory is exposed as a covert or an overt expression of a particularistic interest, the will to power, or an unconscious wish, it should be rejected and unmasked (p. 317).

Some comments. History is one of the disciplines most affected by the search for alternative approaches in social sciences because of the overwhelming presence of official versions with their distinct biases and interests. PAR fieldwork has uncovered a new potential in treasured family belongings ("coffer archives") and testimonies by well-versed community elders who

render richer and more complex versions of events. This is a technical basis for the concept of "critical recovery of history."

Vivencia, on the other hand, implies immersion in field conditions and identification with local communities that combine research and action. It cannot be assumed through mere interviewing as a passing experience. It is also beyond classical participant observation because it breaks up the observer's subject-object dichotomy. In situations of conflict that are so widespread, research with *vivencia* is the only way to do it successfully because the researcher shares his or her commitment with the peoples involved in transforming conflictive realities. It fosters mutual trust and responsibility. Moreover, *vivencia* enriches and widens the researcher's life experience.

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2. Skills, attitudes, procedures

Collective research is more satisfactory than individual research for its own mechanisms of correction, verification of data, and validation for group action (III, p. 338; IV, p. 150).

Critical recovery of history selects subterranean versions of the past, different from official ones, through testimonies, storytelling, and selection of documents and facts in defense of interests of exploited classes (I, pp. 38-40; III, p. 339; IV, pp. 53, 1559).

Valuing and applying folk culture recognizes essential or core values related to local cultural and ethnic elements of collective memory such as art, sports, myths, and other expressions of human sentiment that can be rallied into action (III, p. 341).

Systematic devolution of knowledge implies respect for communication so that meanings are well understood all those involved. We have

Symmetric reciprocity requires mutual understanding and translatability of meanings. The language of the observer must be properly

identified four levels of communication that match levels of educational development and literacy along with different communicative styles and media (discussed later). Researchers should be able to communicate in all levels (I, p. 45; III, p. 344).

Symmetrical communication develops through *dialogue* and consensus so that interpretation of events or facts is effective and has consequences for action through awareness building (conscientization) (I, p. 60; III, p. 337; IV, p. 148).

The *action-reflection-action cycle* or *spiral* is an adequate solution derived from the dialectical method (I, p. 39). Persistence and long-range processes are anticipated and/or promoted from the micro to the macro in social and regional movements and through networks (IV, pp. 6, 7, 153).

For *evaluation* of transformative tasks, the opinion of subject *reference groups* (interviewees), as expressed in recorded changes of conduct and/or structure, can be considered final (I, p. 43). This is a political experience (I, p. 43; III, p. 334). Concerned scientists can become organic intellectuals (I, p. 52; IV, p. 19).

Sound and meaningful interpretations of realities can include a skeleton or inner structure ("hard data") and a flesh or outer structure for communication and description (IV, p. 57).

translatable into the language of the participant member of the institution under examination to be understood by the broader public (pp. 304-305).

The best relationship to witnesses is not one of interrogation but one of *conversation* on equal terms so that "a fusion of horizons" comes about (p. 307). A fair *consensus* between researcher and participant members of the inquiry is possible and will be based on, and result from, true knowledge. It may turn into "revelation" (p. 313) and it should be amply shared (p. 318).

Researched tasks are not inherently pleasant or unpleasant but become so from the standpoint of the guiding value of a particular theory. *Evaluation* is thus possible and necessary (p. 298).

A product of the social sciences contains two related parts: a core and a ring.

The *skeleton structure* derives from verifiable, authoritative sources that can be referred to repeatedly and responsibly (IV, p. 57).

The *flesh structure* is used to fill empty spaces created for loss of documentation due to involuntary factors or to meddling by others. This completion is done with a measure of imagination exercised within cultural matrices and with reference to real-life conditions, avoiding incongruities and absolute contradictions (IV, pp. 56-57).

There should be a balance between skeleton and flesh structures; otherwise the interpretation may turn into a nomothetic exercise if the skeleton is too heavy or into a mere literary piece if the flesh is excessive (IV, p. 57). A balance should be achieved between the brain and the heart (IV, p. 150).

Core knowledge is of the type that one has good reason to believe that any person would arrive at if this person studied all the available sources, thoroughly observed the relevant phenomena, entered into discussion with the members of the scientific community familiar with the matter under scrutiny, and undertook these things from any perspective whatsoever (p. 299).

Ring knowledge is insight, interpretation, and understanding of a kind one arrives at from a particular standpoint, perspective, or cultural interest against the backdrop of certain life experiences, individual or collective. It has a special capacity to render meaning because it brings originality, innovation, novelty, surprise—elements of the unexpected, of *imagination*—into the core (pp. 299, 310).

If, in relation to the core, the ring is too thin, then the knowledge provided by a particular work of social science will be unexciting, albeit true—unimportant, albeit informative. If, in relation to the core, the ring is too wide or too thick, then the work in question will be more a work of fiction or ideology than one of social science proper. This is one of the most formidable tasks of modern social science because explanation is its brain whereas interpretation is its soul (pp. 299-300, 310).

Some comments. The four skills mentioned at the beginning of this section may be PAR's special contribution to social research methodology. Thus an emphasis on collectivities becomes a good way to ensure good data cross-reference and triangulation. Critical history based on archival materials and

oral tradition is supportive of communal dignity and enhances the communities' will to act. Valuing folk culture as a rule is only a descriptive element in other schools; here it achieves a dynamic dimension that helps to understand social situations and to motivate action.

Devolution of knowledge is related to message comprehension. Receptors can be classified in four levels: 0 for nonuse of the written word, especially useful for aboriginal groups and to draw "cultural maps"; 1 for semiliterate groups with the use of drawings and simple texts, comic style; 2 for cadres and local leaders who can more easily assimilate concepts; and 3 for intellectuals and academicians.

This need for conveying meaningful research results led to the invention of my double-column book, *Historia Doble de la Costa* (Double History of the Coast), which combines levels 2 and 3 with the same message written in two different styles and providing for simultaneous editing on opposite pages. This literary device has also been used by some anthropologists and physicians. It is related to Heller's concept of "symmetric reciprocity" and gives origin to rhetorical and writing skills such as "imputation." By imputation, the researcher sums up related data gathered from different persons and adjudicates them stylistically to one of them. The researcher may construct an imaginary figure to suit the need, or he or she may freely elaborate the data in the skeleton (Heller's ring) and flesh (Heller's core) structures for communication and description.

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3. Guidelines and criteria for action/ knowledge

The research task is *open-ended* and subject to contextual and generational reinterpretations (IV, p. 7). It is different from the natural sciences, because in sociology (as Hegel said) "the living do not allow the cause to reach its effect" (I, p. 35). The accidental or fortuitous, the human element of chance and contingency are pertinent intervening factors (I, p. 36).

There is no such thing as the final solution to a problem, not even within one and the same paradigm (p. 293). Social sciences do not only open themselves up to falsification, they also open themselves up to *interpretation-reinterpretation*. They are "treasure troves" that we always revisit (p. 296) in a hermeneutical spiral (p. 305).

The committed researcher breaks up the *subject-object* relationship in

Social science should not use the *addressee as the means* to achieve

his or her task and makes it symmetrical or horizontal. This is an ethical imperative as well as an efficiency-practical requirement. This is defined as authentic *participation* (I, pp. 34, 37, 50; III, p. 332; IV, p. 152) that may finally lead to "acting as one subject" (I, p. 51).

Praxis, in which the practical is cyclically determinant (I, p. 41), is not the ultimate criterion of validity. It should receive the guiding hand of good judgment and prudence to turn common sense into good sense (i.e., with *phronesis*) (IV, p. 156). Thus praxis and phronesis together would provide for meaningful behavior that would resolve the reflection-action binomial.

A totalizing and more meaningful *paradigm* is possible if, to academic knowledge, one adds and takes into account the knowledge and wisdom of the common people in a plural universe. Instrumental rationality can be enriched, corrected, limited, or supplemented by common sense or experiential or practical rationality (III, p. 332) based on the functional, daily-life people's science with its infinite variety (I, pp. 37, 44; III, p. 337).

certain goals of the social scientist. This interdiction is both practical (moral) and theoretical (p. 297). Truth in sociology consists of the *agreement* between researcher and the object of his or her research (the participant member) (p. 311).

The proper balance between identity and nonidentity elements, the "core" and the "ring," depends on the phronesis of the social scientist (p. 300) There are no objective criteria to follow (p. 305). *Imagination* with good judgment is required.

General consensus on true knowledge is ideal. If only nonprofessionals find truth in a theory whereas social scientists find none at all, or vice versa, then this theory is not true and can be thrown into the bin (p. 318).

The North-South intellectual convergence in the quest for meaning as herein described may become more frequent and useful as globalization trends continue and late capitalism completes its expansion. The presence in Europe and North America of immigrants from former colonies induces the adoption of research and action methods developed in the South for better understanding of local problems. The rise of marginal peoples such as the natives of Canada and the Black and Chicano communities of the United States is calling attention to participatory techniques emphasized in the South.

Meanwhile, the formation of networks of academicians and technicians in both hemispheres through electronic mail and other means is helping the South to modernize and update data banks and archival materials. Exchange students and postgraduate work in the North is likewise upgrading scholarship elsewhere. Such trends are bound to assist all those involved in these schemes, provided there is a true spirit of partnership and mutual scholarly respect. Then convergences of different types may become more meaningful. The Cartagena 1997 congresses will be a positive step in this direction.

Of course, attention to rigor and validity in qualitative participatory research is a permanent necessity. There is still a persistent idea that those of us who engage in these activities are not as serious as are others who apply "hard" criteria or data. This may not be so. Profound reassessments of case studies and other qualitative methods are advancing well (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1994). For this purpose, the North and South can merge each one with its own history, mental and technical capacity, and cultural identity to produce richer and more pertinent and useful knowledge for life, progress, and peace.

NOTE

1. It so happens that my article in *Dialectical Anthropology* came out in the same issue with Heller's, "Towards an Anthropology of Feeling," with only the difference of a few pages. Being a collaborator of Georg Lukacs, Heller could not avoid at least looking at the many quotations from *History and Class Consciousness* included in my article; thus there should have been some cross-pollination of ideas.

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