

Book Review

Fals Borda, Orlando (2009):
Una sociología sentipensante para América Latina:
*Antología. [A Feeling-thinking Sociology for Latin
America: Anthology]* Editor: Víctor Manuel Moncayo
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After reading this volume of almost 500 pages, in which Víctor Manuel Moncayo gathers pieces of Orlando Fals Borda's work, one has a picture of much more than the writings of a particular author. The articles and book chapters reproduced in the anthology represent a great part of the history of Latin America in the last half century. Colombia is obviously at the centre of his quests and studies, but there is at least something of Colombia in every Latin American country, be it in terms of violence, movements of resistance and rhythms of life

The book is divided into five sections. In the first one, Fals Borda tells us about his first years of life. He was born in Barranquilla, on July 11, 1925, in a family which he remembers with tenderness. His father was teacher and journalist, and provided the little boy with books of heroes and adventures. His mother founded the National Campaign against Cancer, and created the first radio programmes in Barranquilla dedicated to social matters. Still very young, he published what he later considered his first ethnographic paper: a detailed report about people and communities he encountered on an excursion in Sierra Nevada. His participation in the Society of Young Presbyterians, his studies at the Colegio Americano in Bogotá and his military service in the Colombian Army have been quite decisive. Here ends the account of his first years in the text. From his biography we know about his studies of Sociology in the United States, his talent for music, and his leading role in

founding the first School of Sociology in Latin America at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

The second section is about the agrarian situation in Colombia. The life of peasants has been the central field for his studies, and his descriptions and analyses combine analytical rigour with deep empathy with this exploited sector of Colombian society. As he tells us, in contrast to other professions, agriculture exercises a certain hypnotism on the peasants, due to their attachment to the land, and their dependence on external conditions. This hypnotism, however, can also turn out to be a factor that inhibits people's lives, although there will always be ways to cope with adversity through music, parties, and other artistic expressions. His immersion in the popular culture leads him to unveil a great richness of mechanisms of resistance, coming to the conclusion that it would not be easy to confirm that in the Colombian coastal regions the dominant ideas of a given period are the ideas of the dominant class (Marx).

Violence is the great theme of the next section. As is well known, violence has marked Colombian society in the past century. In Fals Borda's understanding, violence in Colombia "could be interpreted as an amazing accumulation of dysfunctions in all fundamental institutions" (p. 139). Ironically, they have been functional in another sense: the police have not been agents for keeping order, but for fostering disorder and crime; judges have promoted impunity, i.e., the denial of justice; due to violence, land ownership has become conditioned to control of a particular area by militarised groups. In short, one could speak of an institutionalised dysfunction. Despite the calamitous situation, his writings are pervaded by a profound hope for change, as he wrote in 1963: "We have no doubt that the country will overcome this stage of confusion and ignominy. Sooner or later the sun of the new Colombia will warm up our bones. To the generous generation that will have to redeem us, the one who will correct the biblical prophecy, we dedicate the present book, with hope." (p. 216).

The largest portion of the anthology includes articles grouped under the heading "Science and Praxis". Given the role of Orlando Fals Borda in the field of Action Research, we will also pay special attention to this matter in our review. In Latin America he is identified with IAP (Investigación Acción

Participativa), which means at the same time an affiliation with the classical movement of Action Research, but also a specific emphasis derived from the ethical and political commitments of social researchers in this particular part of the world.

Since the beginning of his research praxis, Fals Borda insists that social science is not politically neutral, and that it has the potential for becoming an instrument for social transformation. To a certain extent, he argues, there is no clearly defined division between scientific sociology and political science. However, in order to keep up with this purpose, there is the need to develop research techniques, as well as concepts of science which correspond to Latin American reality. His defence of a “popular science” is not necessarily antagonistic to classical science, but refers to the places (*topias*) which provide the perspective for the analyses. He is as much against giving sacred status to knowledge from experience, as against xenophobic attitudes towards developments in social research in other contexts. A brief look at some of his articles suffices to become aware of how he deals with classical and present day specialised literature, as well as with intellectual and artistic production from members of the communities.

At the backdrop of his arguments is the assumption that we are living at a time of fundamental processes of social transformation. On one hand, it is a privilege to be part of a generation that has such an opportunity; on the other hand, it implies a responsibility to interpret this transformation and derive adequate data to help shaping the future. A challenge facing the social researcher is to balance his/her life experience with the rational attitudes and procedures. His concept of *inserted observation* (as distinct from *participant observation* and *intervening observation*) gives a clue to the position of the researcher (p. 235). It means an immersion of the researcher within the processes he is studying, in order to have an “inner vision” of the situation with the perspective of present and future actions. At the same time, Fals Borda calls attention to the necessity of independent work in relation to any political party, although in the course of the study there are contacts and exchanges.

The social researcher, given the fact that he is dealing with actions which are preceded by volition, also has to be aware that human action takes place within a context of multiple determination, in which it acquires its meaning.

Research is carried out within a penumbra which, far from being a drawback, represents the possibility for encountering the fortuitous and the uncertain. That is also why “a social science of the working people and for them” would have to integrate different disciplines, besides sociology, such as economy, history, geography, psychology, political science and law.

Fals Borda understands that scientific knowledge can be generated within the action of the working masses, and that social research and political action, together, can influence each other mutually, to increase as much the level of efficacy of action, as well as of the understanding of reality. This also means that there is not a clearly dividing line between subjects and objects of research. He brings an example from the interview process, where both the interviewer and the interviewed are engaged in an experience of participation and consensus between receiver and giver of information, both of them identified around shared necessities and the purpose of this experience. There are also tasks which can be better performed by community members, such as collecting stories or gathering documents or old photos.

In this research methodology, it is not sufficient to manage the ability to write academic papers, scholarly books and professional reports. Fals Borda was a master in creating channels for the common people to have access to the knowledge collectively produced. He shares some examples of how he proceeded: 1) studies were carried out and published on the history and socio-economic situation of the regions to enable people to situate themselves in their reality; 2) illustrated texts were published, in simple and direct language, with the basic findings; 3) a national magazine was published to broaden the audience; 4) courses were given fundamental principles and basic instruments of social research so that community members could continue developing studies; 5) in all the projects there was an effort to use direct, clear and simple language, in order to bridge the gap between academic-scientific knowledge and local communities.

The fifth section of the book comes under the title “La subversión” [*subversion*). In this part of the book the reader will understand what Fals Borda means when he refers to the inseparability of sociology and political science. An example of this relationship can be found in his book “Las revoluciones inconclusas en América Latina” [*The unfinished revolutions in Latin Amer-*

ica]. The revolutions in Latin America so far, he argues, have been unable to answer the ontological dilemma of who we are as a people, or as a conjunction of peoples. Subversion, in this context, acquires a positive meaning, namely, as the “condition which reflects the internal incongruencies of a social order discovered by its members in a given historical period, in the light of newly valued aims which a society wants to achieve.”(p. 450). The purpose is the creation of a new *topia* which, on its turn, carries within itself the residual contradictions which will lead to new subversions. In other words, along with his engagement for change, there is no room in Fals Borda’s thinking for a static social order. Even his “socialismo raizal” [*rooted socialism*] is not immune to deformities and to change. Until the year of his death (2008), Orlando Fals Borda was actively engaged in unveiling the spiral of violence and pacifying his country. As he wrote: “The magma restrained for decades is starting to make itself visible in successive eruptions. Magma is life, is symptom of reconstruction.” (p. 487).

The book is co-edited by CLACSO (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales) whose headquarters are located in Buenos Aires (Argentina), and which has contributed significantly for the development of critical social theory in Latin America. The title of the anthology, *Una sociología sentipensante*, suggests the combination of feeling and thinking in the action of doing research. As the organiser explains in his Introduction, the expression has been frequently used in Fals Borda’s later writings and lectures. It may well be an important tool for deepening the comprehension of our task as researchers and citizens.

About the author

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