

Homage to Fals Borda: A report from III International Symposium of Action and Participatory research (Bogotá, June 22-25, 2015)

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This text is a report from the *III International Symposium of Action and Participatory research* that took place in Bogotá (Colombia), from June 22 to 25, 2015. These conferences originated from the *International Journal of Action Research's* intention of providing a regular space for action researchers to meet, share and evaluate their practices. As Colombia was the homeland of Orlando Fals Borda (1925-2008), his living memory was very much felt during the symposium, which was also intended to pay homage to this researcher who keeps influencing much of action and participatory research in Latin America. *Investigación Acción Participativa (IAP)* revealed itself to be a quite well established approach within the larger context of action research. The papers were largely centered on methodological creativity, and the discussions called attention to the importance of situating research practices and projects within the present global social and economic context.

Key words: Action Research, participatory research, *Investigación acción participativa (IAP)*, Orlando Fals Borda, participatory methodologies

Introduction

Action Research grew in different social and political contexts, acquiring different forms and sometimes different names. It is today a rather broad cluster of practices that, nevertheless, have in common some basic epistemological assumptions which, in their turn, are also not established as unchallenged and unchanging laws. The *International Journal of Action Research* takes an active part in developing this complex field by providing a platform for sharing relevant practices and theoretical advances. With the passage of time, however, there was also felt the need to create other spaces where researchers could meet face-to-face to discuss their projects and approaches to action research. The original idea of an academy of action research was at the horizon at this time, and still inspires the movement of itinerant forums which are taking place.

With these considerations as a backdrop, the First Symposium of Action and Participatory Research was organised in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in June 2011, under the theme “Research and Social Transformation”. In this symposium connection was made with the international conferences organised by Orlando Fals Borda in Cartagena (Colombia), in 1977 and 1997. Although very modest as compared to the Colombian conferences, Porto Alegre’s experience evidenced the relevance and timeliness of organising dialogical spaces for researchers working with action research and, more generally, with participatory methodologies. Selected papers were published in the *International Journal of Action Research*, Vol. 7(2), 2011 and Vol. 7(3), 2011 and in the book *Conhecer e transformar: pesquisa ação e pesquisa participante em diálogo internacional* (2014). At the end it was decided that the next meeting would be held in Copenhagen (Denmark).

In the letter of invitation, Marianne Kristiansen and Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen, the organisers of the Copenhagen conference, reaffirmed the purpose of this forum as well as proposing a provocative theme, as they wrote: “The conference is an invitation to researchers and practitioners interested in participatory and action research. The purpose of the conference is to establish a forum for renewed reflections on the concept of participation in relation

to power whether you work with organisational development projects in Scandinavia, participatory projects aiming at empowering marginalised groups in Latin America, social community projects in the UK etc. What are the challenges, dilemmas and tensions of participation, power, and democracy in participatory and action research projects? How are these dealt with theoretically and tackled practically?" A special issue of the *International Journal of Action Research*, Vol. 9(1), 2013 was organized on the topic of participation and power, and selected papers were also published in an e-book (*Participation and power: In participatory research and action research*, 2014). It was proposed that the next meeting should take place in Bogotá (Colombia), the homeland of Orlando Fals Borda.

Alfonso Torres Carrillo, professor at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, took up the responsibility to organise this conference which had its focus on methodological advances and creativity. As the forum moves from one place, meaning countries and continents, to another, it also experiences new formats. In this case, there are three important features to be mentioned. The first one is that there was a movement of pre-forums, involving the universities that participated in the organisation. This also meant that the Symposium did not happen in just one place, but participants were invited to know other spaces and other people in the city. The second aspect was the invitation to visit actual practices of action research in the two days after the regular conference in urban and in rural communities. Thirdly, it was an opportunity to pay homage to Orlando Fals Borda. Participants came to know *in loco* about the work and life of this man who keeps inspiring new generations of researchers in Latin America. In the two topics what follows we will present (1) the axes around which the program was organised and (2) some general considerations about the symposium.

“IAP,¹ without creative men and women, does not work”

The symposium was organised around axes that reveal a movement towards methodological creativity: 1) The confluences between IAP and other critical perspectives; 2) IAP and other participatory methodologies; 3) IAP and different professional fields; 4) Participatory strategies and methodologies; 5) IAP, territories, and local social processes; 6) IAP and empowerment of social actors. These axes share some common features, like the dialogue with other analytical perspective within the field of critical theory, methodological openness for other professional fields, the relation between the methodological variants and popular education, its origin and base in diverse territories of political action and local processes of resistance, and the liberation dimension of the research process when subjects constitute themselves as agents of social transformation. All of them point to the continuing relevance of IAP today.

The presence of popular educators, academics of different levels, researchers of different social contexts and movements resulted in a great richness of dialogue. Permeating these organising axes of the symposium, as mentioned before, there was the homage to Fals Borda. Besides organising specific moments of remembrance of his work, there could be felt in the presentations of papers and in the panel discussions the pulsation of his “sociology of subversion”.

In a recent book written collectively (Streck, Pitano, Moretti, C., Santos, Lemos, & Paulo, 2014b), there is a chapter where we presented some tendencies in the history of action and participatory research in Latin America. One of them refers to the political-pedagogical relation of the “word pregnant [filled] with world”, through the Paulo Freire method, and the special place of the “thematic investigation circles” in the literacy programme, as well as research-teaching through a theory that derives from practice. Moreover, it is

¹ IAP stands for *Investigación acción participativa*. In this text we will keep this abbreviation for the Spanish form instead of PAR (*Participatory action research*). We understand that this a better way of keeping the particularities of one of the developments of action research in Latin America.

about the understanding that one as the other cannot be copied, but need to be recreated in the process of producing knowledge with the subjects.

The second tendency could be called an “anthropology of trust”, identified with the work of Carlos Rodrigues Brandão. According to him, if in the conventional positivistic type of research one trusts the reliability of instruments, and in traditional qualitative research one trusts himself as trustworthy producer of knowledge, in participatory research one trusts the other as a reliable partner in the production of knowledge. (Streck et al., 2014a, p.138). The proximity of the subjects involved in research presupposes trust among all the subjects, each one with his/her particular role.

In another tendency, the key concept is experience. The “systematisation of experience”, as developed by Oscar Jara, intends to be an alternative to face in a creative way the dichotomy theory-practice. Its premise is to pass from a spontaneous social practice to a scientific praxis that enriches knowledge and transformative social practice starting from reflected life experiences (Streck & Jara, 2015; Torres, 2010). Experience is transformed through the dialogical relationship in the different moments of the reflexive-organising work on experience.

Finally, there is the sociological dimension of action research which has its roots in the subversion of sociology by Fals Borda, who is the main reference in this tendency. This approach allows us to analyse the actual situations of social conflict as well as the transition of the subjects that produce knowledge from “one form of life to another”. In the IAP one finds the criticality of daily life praxis linked to the subversive character of research in its commitment to an emancipatory/liberating social project. (Fals Borda, 2013).

In the organising axes of this symposium the presence-absence of Fals Borda could be translated as “epistemic disobedience”, since one of the key elements was the search for the rupture with the dominant logic of knowing the world. In the attempts of methodological reinvention there could be found the radicalness of his presence in the homages paid to him, and not in a kind of reification or sacralisation of his contributions. As one participant said: “IAP does not work without creative men and women.” It is based on this common search for creative reinvention that we want to present some notes

with the intention to bring some example from the discussions and eventually bring forth the potentiality of action and participatory research.

Some key issues

Is IAP a critical scientific method? When we refer to IAP, does everybody mean the same? Can the critical aspect be absent in the methodological constructions and reinventions? What is the end of IAP? Who practices IAP and in what conditions? Is it a conception, a methodology or a daily life practice? What is IAP, today?

These questions were dealt with, as may be seen in expressions such as “it is a research for transformation”, “IAP is a combination and conjunction of three elements (research, action, participation) that seeks popular recognition”; it is a research process where “the participants are subjects of knowledge and producers of knowledge”; “there should be no separation between political action and political theory or between educational practice and pedagogical theory”; participation is understood as “a permanent exercise between dialogue of different knowledges and co-responsibility”. The discussions around IAP recover the commitment of the researcher with the communities or organizations without intending to be *them* or do something *for them*, but from their experiences help them to appropriate themselves of what is collective.

Some interventions pointed out that the integration of *research-action-participation* is part of a process that leads to a new paradigm of science open to process, to context, to daily life knowledge and to action-reflection. These considerations, while representing a type of epistemic disobedience, point to an alternative to *knowledge as regulation* (positivistic colonialist), to *knowledge as meaning* (hermeneutical colonialist), in the direction of *knowledge as emancipation/liberation* (action, participation and solidarity). We may thus situate IAP as one of the possible decolonial responses within the context of *transmodernity*² (Dussel, 2005) together with the pedagogy of

² For Dussel, *transmodernity* refers to the effort to go beyond modernity, without denying it, as some post-modern theories do, but keeping its emancipatory nucleus.

the oppressed, the theology of liberation, the theatre of the oppressed, the theory of dependency, and more recently, with feminist epistemology.

Though not much debated, feminist studies were present in the symposium. As known, feminism broke the harmony of the scientific world bringing forth the history of women, and by demonstrating the disastrous character of patriarchal society as well as the silencing character of dominant modern science. The trajectories and life histories of women promote a self-formative process and denounce masculine dominance that is even prior to colonialism and capitalism, as can be evidenced in the indigenous communities in Latin America. How could we construct a cartography of gender violence without the voices, the territories and the knowledge that are rooted in the experience of these women? The particularities of a country as Colombia and its history of violence would probably not be highlighted as relevant in the life of women if it depended on conventional methodologies of knowledge production.

Other issues, not less important, kept coming up during the symposium. Is IAP a kind of popular knowledge or a science? Or maybe a popular science? Without pretending to force a consensus, it could be pointed out that we are dealing with an emerging science that is characterised by social and political commitment, that has a clear ethical stance, that is carried out starting with/from participants knowledge and aims at producing new knowledge, thus not being just a dialogue of knowledges. IAP, in this sense, cannot be understood as “spontaneous”.

IAP is obviously not a static methodology, and, as could be seen from the papers and discussions, there were changes in practices and conception. The core idea persists that it is an action for the production of knowledge that allows transforming reality in the direction of social justice. This is a convergence among papers, experiences, and dialogues in the symposium: IAP changes the ways of transforming reality, as it changes reality, but is also changes ways of sensing and feeling, of expressing oneself. It produces an “incarnated” knowledge, because it is, as Fals Borda put it, a thinking-feeling process.

If the construction of knowledge is a social practice, whose practice is it? Whom does this methodology serve? There were not few manifestations in

this third symposium of action research and participatory research that called attention to the relevance of *context* as imperative for IAP. Some of the arguments stressed the civilization crisis, in the presence of extreme capitalism, and extractivist neoliberalism. From the perspective of the IAP, research should question the adaptation to the logic of domination and exploitation. In this sense, a *localist* perspective of research, which also characterises many action research studies, should be at least framed within a global context. Where is, today, the totality with its parts? What is the relation between the intentional and the spontaneous elements in participatory methodologies?

IAP requires understanding the historicity of subjects and spaces in the process of producing knowledge through action and participation. In the *experience* we already are others, concretely, researchers and researched. This is part of the IAP process, then it does not allow us to *be* as we were, and not to *think* as before, independent of the role we have in the research process. From the perspective of Latin America, IAP is part of a vast array of research methodologies compromised with the metaphorical south where we find the “condemned of the earth”.

Concluding remarks

Participants greeted the opportunity to share their experiences with people who had the chance to learn and work with Fals Borda, whose memory is still very much alive on campus and among social movements and organisations committed to the promotion of peace and justice in a society that for decades lives with violence. Some of the lessons learned from him permeated the discussions. I summarise some of them in what follows.

Investigación Acción Participativa revealed itself to be a quite well established approach within the larger context of action research. It can be found in research practices with popular groups as well as in the context of implementation of public policies in health care and education, among others. One of its features is not only the diversity of fields where it is applied, but also its interdisciplinarity or, as Fals Borda would prefer, the convergence of disciplines and knowledges.

Participation is affirmed as an ethical, political and pedagogical principle. It does not suffice to know something; knowledge should be related to virtuous action in society (*phronesis*). Participation as a political principle is embedded in Fals Borda's utopia of rooted socialism (*socialism raizal*), a social organisation that is grounded in people's experience of exploitation and resistance. It is a pedagogical principle inasmuch it is necessarily linked up with forming an active and informed citizenship. Fals Borda tells us that today we may indeed need a participatory Quijotism. The fecundity of these principles expresses itself in the richness of practices that explicitly connect themselves to Fals Borda.

At the same time, it was noted that the reference to Fals Borda should be taken as a challenge to look for theoretical and practical approximations in two directions. Going back in history to find the sources on which this experience was based, in Latin America and in other parts of the world. At the same time, looking forward to find out what the new socio-political contexts requires or allows in terms of research approach. For instance, what kind of research needs to be done and can be done in the new work conditions? What input do the recent decolonial studies in Latin America represent for action research?

Action Research, particularly what is called "systematisation of experiences", is quite often developed outside the academy. There are in Latin America hundreds of practices that find themselves between evaluation and social research. What they have in common is the desire to produce knowledge from and about their practice, and to improve their efficiency and efficacy. There have been developed methodologies which help groups to recover their history, to understand their social and cultural context, and to identify the weaknesses and strengths of their practice.

That is also why in some discussions academic research was put to the test. The criticism is correct when it criticises academic conventional academic research which tends to either distance itself from actual practice or becomes applied research, producing knowledge sufficient to operate specific changes. Action research produces a knowledge whose practicability extends beyond a specific situation, and becomes an instrument for further knowing. It not only provides feedback, but feeds knowledge into social processes and

practices. While practicing action research in academic settings one should learn to use different forms of expression, like images, videos, artistic language, etc. Academic scientific language has its specific public and style, needing to be considered one language or dialect among others.

A new invitation

The forum will now reinvent itself in a quite different socio-historical and academic context. At the end of the symposium we were glad to hear that Werner Fricke was considering the possibility of having the meeting in Germany. This has now been confirmed, and he, Sabine Pfeiffer and Ines Langemeyer will soon tell us how to get prepared to meet in Karlsruhe, where we will know and be challenged by different traditions and practices of action research.

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