

# **To Change the World: Latin American Contributions to the Development of Participatory Research<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

My name is Budd Hall. I am a descendent of English immigrants. I am privileged to live and work on the unceded territory of the Lekwungen and Sencothan speaking peoples, the Esquimalt, Songhees and Wsaanic' First Nations. My city is known by the colonial name of Victoria. It is on Vancouver Island on the West Coast of Canada surrounded by the Salish Sea. When my great grandparents immigrated to Vancouver Island, they occupied land stolen from the Halalt First Nation. The theft of that land raised my family to middle class status. At the same time, the loss of that land condemned the former users of that land, the Halalt First Nations to lives of poverty.

I am honoured to be able to share some modest thoughts on the contributions of Latin American scholar activists to the historic roots of participatory research. Please keep in mind that each of us tells the story of their own journey based on who they are and who they are not what they have seen and what they have not seen. Other people might tell this story differently. They are not wrong. Reality is vast, transformative and ever evolving. I am exceedingly grateful to have been able to share this journey of knowledge to change the world with so many inspiring men and women from Latin America. Some of our companero/as are still living. Some have left us.

The late 1960s and 1970s was a period of deep questioning about research and researchers. Positivism, the research approach predicated on objectivity, detachment and measurability of sociological, political, cultural and other human phenomena found itself confronted by the rise of ecological concerns, with the status of women, with the Independence movements in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and with the struggles for democracy in Latin America, Europe and North America. The Science Shop movement was born in the Netherlands as young science students and their professors demanded an engaged science that made a direct contribution to the lives of people in their communities. In Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and powerfully so in Latin America, a revolution in thinking about the meaning of science, the transformative role of research, the links between research, action and learning was taking place. Many names have been associated with this later movement, participatory research, action research, militant research and more. The concept which is most widely understood and used in Latin America today is Investigacion Accion Participativa (IAP) in Spanish, Pequisa Participante in Portugese and either Participatory Research or Participatory (Action) Research (PAR) in English. I have been associated with the concept of participatory research since 1973.

My entry into the world of participatory research began in Tanzania in 1970 where I began my first academic job as a researcher in the Institute of Adult Education at the University of Dar es Salaam. Over the next five years, influenced by the ideas of the late President Julius K Nyerere and by a visit from the Brazilian Paulo Freire, we articulated the concept of participatory research as an approach to research for social transformation and change. Having left Tanzania in 1975, I discovered that other researchers in other parts of the world had been developing similar approaches to research and social changes, particularly in Latin America. I met Francisco

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Vio Grossi, a Chilean refugee who was doing a PhD at the University of Sussex in England. He shared his stories about participatory research during the Allende years. In 1977, I had the opportunity to meet the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda at the first international conference on action research in Cartagena, Colombia. From the ideas generated in Tanzania, to the actions from Chile, to the thematic investigation of Freire, came the experience of Rajesh Tandon from India. These previously separate streams of participatory research came together in the creation of the International Participatory Research Network in 1978. Over the following years, I met and interacted with most of the foundational voices in participatory research in Latin America. These early influences have remained an indelible part of my approach to knowledge and action, principles that are embedded in my work as a Co-Chair of our UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. One very important message from my talk is that the theories and practices that comprise participatory research originated in the majority world or what is sometimes called the global South. Because of the power of the Euro-centric English language press, you could think that the contemporary approaches to participatory action research came from Europe or North America and are now being shared into the rest of the world. This is historically untrue. These ideas were born in the struggles for Independence and democracy in the historically dominated countries of the world.

I want to share some reflections today about some of the theories and practices of participatory research that have arisen in Latin America and which continue to shape the way that the world thinks about participatory research. While there are many activist intellectuals who have contributed to what today we call *investigacion y accion*, I have chosen to share some reflections from those whose ideas have most influenced me. They are Paulo Freire, Joao Bosco Pinto Francisco Vio Grossi, Carlos Rodrigues Brandao and Orlando Fals Borda, and. I begin with Paulo Freire and Joao Bosco Pinto first as I first met Paulo in Tanzania in 1971. Joao Bosco was the person who extended Paulo's ideas about research into a full psycho-socio approach to research. Francisco Vio Grossi was the founder of both the Latin American network of participatory research and the Latin American Council for Adult Education (CEAAL). Carlos Rodrigues Brandao wrote the first book in Portuguese on *Pesquisa Participante*. And Orlando Fals Borda is the person who has most powerfully, eloquently and actively expressed and documented the concept of IAP.

Brandao (2005) characterizes the approaches to IAP in Latin America as distinctive from the ideas of earlier European and American sociologists such as Kurt Lewin (action research) or Sol Tax (action anthropology). He notes that Latin Americans were inspired by Marxist analysis of economic inequality, they were self-consciously emancipatory, promoting radical change through political collaboration with popular movements as opposed to seeing participation as an individual act or within more apolitical contexts.

### **To Read the World- Paulo Freire**

I was working in Tanzania in 1970 when *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published. It is impossible to express the excitement and the joy with which those of us working in adult education in Tanzania felt when reading his ideas about literacy as a liberatory process. The ideas which Freire expressed of reading the world beyond reading the word fit well into the philosophical approach to respect for the knowledge of ordinary people that Nyerere was

speaking about. But it was his description of what he called thematic investigation that was a powerful message about a new way of thinking about research. At the heart of his call for the process of conscientization was dialogue. And for dialogue to be an effective tool for transforming reality it had to be between persons who each have words implying action or praxis. “Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.” (p61). Thematic investigation is the research process which Freire used to develop the generative themes that lay at the heart of his revolutionary process of teaching reading and writing. It is based on a process of dialogue and immersion with the women and men in subjugated communities. It called for researchers to learn from people. And perhaps in its most revolutionary moment, it calls for people themselves to be co-researchers in a dialogue about reality and consciousness. “Some may think it inadvisable to include the people as investigators in the search for their own meaningful thematics...This view mistakenly presupposes that themes exist, in their original purity as things” p 78. He goes on to say, “The real danger of the investigation is not that the supposed objects of the investigation, discovering themselves to be co-investigators, might adulterate the analytical results. On the contrary, the danger lies in the risk of shifting the focus of the investigation from the meaningful themes to the people themselves, thereby treating the people as objects of the investigation” (p 79)

### **Research as cultural action for freedom – Joao Bosco Pinto**

The Brazilian scholar Michel Thiollent, says that Pinto “established the relationship between the principles of Dialectical Materialism and Phenomenology, which strengthened the specifically humanistic dimension of the proposal” (p. 34). For Pinto humanity is seen as part of an interconnected universe in which quality of life is determined by one’s insertion in society. Pinto took it as his goal to provide additional theoretical and practical scaffolding to Freire’s research ideas as expressed in his famous Chapter Three of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Pinto’s emphasis was on building a theoretical and methodological praxis linked to the people and land of Brazil. He brought the concept of place-based knowledge and research to our attention. While Freire because of his exile in Bolivia, Chile, the USA and Switzerland became a global voice for knowledge for change, Pinto carried the IAP message to an entire generation of Brazilian activist researchers. Pinto called for doing research based on raising awareness, politicization and class mobilization. His goal was structural change.

IAP for Pinto is based on a rejection of the dominance of empiricist positivism in the social sciences. In IAP the researcher constructs reality procedurally through their insertion in social practice. Participatory research is a social practice of knowledge production.

### **Participatory Research and Historical Materialism- Francisco Vio Grossi**

Francisco Vio Grossi, is a Chilean sociologist whose career began during the Allende years in Chile. After years of exile in England, and Venezuela he worked with Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon of India to create the International Participatory Research Network. He would also go on to found the Consejo de Educacion de Adultos in America Latina (CEAAL) which became a democratic space to promote IAP. In 1980, the Latin American PR Network held an important meeting in Ayacucho, Peru where Orlando Fals Borda was also involved. Vio Grossi’s opening

remarks were designed to address concerns that had emerged about previous perceived theoretical weaknesses in the evolving discourse of participatory research. A number of important points emerged from the Ayacucho discussions.

Vio Grossi says that IAP is not and has never been a new ideological and scientific holistic system, an alternative to historical materialism. Historical materialism he pointed out is a framework for understanding society in order to know how to change it. It was never intended as a concrete set of instructions. IAP works at the level of what Marx refers to as secondary contradictions. If the primary contradiction in historical materialism is between labour and capital, the secondary contradictions are about the way that power works in the lives of ordinary people to enforce poverty and powerlessness. What IAP attempts to do is to initiate a process of 'disindoctrination' to allow people to see the processes that have continued to oppress them. Finally, IAP does not refer to all kinds of research that makes use of participation of communities in some ways. It is a knowledge democracy strategy that leads to change in the fundamental conditions that engender poverty, dependence and exploitation. Vio Grossi went on to elaborate seven interlinked phases with which popular organizations themselves might determine the viability of PR linked actions. (p49)

### **The Poet of Participatory Research- Carlos Rodrigues Brandao**

Brandao wrote the first book on IAP, *Pesquisa Participante* (ref 1981) in Portuguese. He has been among the most prolific Brazilian scholars writing now nearly 50 years on issues of knowledge creation, popular education, ecological and spiritual education and health. Along with Joao Bosco Pinto and Joao Francisco de Souza, his work has been critical to the development in Brazil and Latin America of transforming the practice of research from the positivist idea of neutrality and objectivity to one which requires the engagement of people in a knowledge creation process designed to support transformation. Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, argues that participation is best understood as the simultaneous insertion of a research team into a broader social movement and the intervention of the popular organization in the research project itself (Fals Borda and Brandão 1985). In other words, participation involves more than simply inviting peasants to collect information in the service of research: it is a reciprocal process in which popular and scientific knowledge are intertwined with a political goal in mind. He describes three different ways to understand research. *Pesquisa Solitaria* (solitary research) is done by the researcher on their own perhaps in participant observation but not in dialogue with a community. *Pesquisa Solidaria* (Solidarity research) in which the researcher engaged in research for a popular organization, movement or community. *Pesquisa Participante* then is the process of engaged collective knowledge construction with popular movements where the word is understood as an act of power and where learning, research and action are inseparable threads in a collective act of transformation.

### **Learning from the People: Orlando Fals Borda**

Fals Borda is undeniably the best known and most influential of the radical social scientists who came to political consciousness during the 1960s and 70s in every part of Latin America. A sociologist who began life as a product of the status quo sociology of the 50s and 60s. Sociology has always been about people, social class and power, but for most of its discursive life,

sociologists were content to carry out descriptive and positivist studies analysing aspects of society but not engaging in the political action that might change the conditions. Fals Borda was transformed from a life as an objective detached observer of society's shortcomings, a reformist working within the constraints of the state to the revolutionary scholar activist who reinvented research as a process of *conocimiento popular* (people's knowledge) and *ciencia popular* (people's science) by engagement in the lives of rural peoples in Colombia engaged in struggles for their land and lives.. This is a struggle which in many ways continues today. His awakening over many years was dramatically advanced when Fals Borda met Juana Julia Guzman, a peasant organizer whose life work led to the creation of the Association Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos (ARUC). ARUC was a social movement of coastal peasants to reclaim land lost to large landholders of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Fals Borda recorded the story of Juana Julia Guzman and created a research structure, the Caribbean Foundation to support the work of ARUC. His book *la Historia doble de la Costa*, a four-volume book tells the history of the people of the coastal plains in both the words of the people themselves and in a formal sociological manner. Action research as he referred to his work in the early 1970s combined political activism with rigorous empirical investigation in archives and with oral narrators. Their goal was to recover stories of historic struggles in order for those methods to inspire contemporary change.

In 1996, Orlando spoke about four key principles in his approach to IAP.

1. Do not monopolize your knowledge or arrogantly impose your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities taking them as full partners and co-researchers thus filling in the distance between subject and object.
2. Do not trust elite versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests, but be receptive to counternarratives and try to recapture them for purposes of education and enlightenment to advance people's struggles for power and justice
3. Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local values, traits, practices, beliefs and arts for action by and with the researched organizations.
4. Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results but diffuse and share what you have learned together with other in a manner that is understandable and even literary or pleasant; for science should not be necessarily a mystery or a monopoly of jargon-loaded experts, intellectual and consultants.

It is impossible in a talk such as this to capture adequately the full trajectory of the Fals Borda vision. Let me leave us with the simplest and perhaps most powerful of Orlando's concepts. When Orlando began his work with the people of the Caribbean coast in the Department of Cordoba, he spent time with the fishers, with the home makers with the farmers in this watery world, a world where he described the people as amphibious. They understood and made their livings living as efficiently on the land as in the rivers and the sea. One of the fishers was explaining to him how they learned to live in this world. He told Orlando that when they created knowledge, they used their hearts and their heads. He told Orlando that they are sentipensantes. They are feeling and thinking people. To be sentipensante is for Orlando the call to all of us who want to be knowledge workers to change the world.