

Participation and Democratization of Knowledge: new convergences for reconciliation: a report from the 5th Conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas

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Abstract

In 1977 in Cartagena de las Indias, Colombia, an international conference was held gathering leading personalities in action research from all continents. The fifth conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), held in the same city, June 12-16 2017, sought to bring back the memory of this meeting and identify advances and obstacles to action research today. Under the title “Participation and Democratisation of Knowledge: new convergences for reconciliation”, the event gathered people from different social contexts and fields of action from 60 countries, representing all continents. This report is based on notes taken by the authors during the conference. Fifty-two key words were identified that provided the base to systematise a few central topics of the conference, including the consolidation of values and principles of participatory research, decolonisation as an ethical, political and esthetic commitment, the role of universities in relation to innovative and transgressive practices, epistemology from below and the transforming potential of systematising experiences.

Key words: ARNA (Action Research Network of the Americas); IAP (Investigación Acción Participativa); decolonization; epistemological ruptures; popular education

Participación y Democratización del Conocimiento: nuevas convergencias para la reconciliación: un relato de la 5ta Conferencia de la Red de Investigación-Acción de las Américas

Resumen

En el año 1977 se realizó en Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, una conferencia internacional que reunió exponentes de la investigación-acción de todos los continentes. La quinta conferencia de la Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), realizada en la misma ciudad, entre los días 12 y 16 de junio de 2017, buscó rescatar la memoria de este encuentro e identificar avances y obstáculos para la investigación-acción. Con el título “Participación y Democratización del Conocimiento: nuevas convergencias para la reconciliación”, el evento reunió personas de diferentes contextos sociales y áreas de actuación, procedentes de 60 países, representando todos los continentes. Este relato está basado en anotaciones realizadas por los autores en el transcurso de la conferencia. Fueron identificadas 52 palabras clave que sirvieron de base para la sistematización de algunos temas centrales de la conferencia, entre los cuales se encuentran la consolidación de valores y principios de la investigación participativa, la descolonización como compromiso ético, político y estético, el papel de las universidades frente a las prácticas innovadoras y transgresoras, la epistemología desde abajo y el potencial transformador de la sistematización de experiencias.

Palabras clave: ARNA (Action Research Network of the Americas); IAP (Investigación Acción Participativa); descolonización; rupturas epistemológicas; educación popular.

Introduction

The fifth conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) was held at Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, between the 12th and 16th of June, 2017.¹ Under the title: “Participation and Democratisation of Knowledge: new convergences for reconciliation”, the event gathered people from different social contexts and fields of action, from 60 countries, representing all the continents. The central theme focused on reconciliation, considering the movement of approach between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Forças Armadas Revolucionárias da Colômbia – Exército do Povo (FARC-EP))². Reconciliation is thus directed at the promotion of a peace process in the country, that began in 2016, when a ceasefire was signed between both sides.

With a massive international presence, the event appears to have achieved its objectives, above all the fourth and fifth which aimed respectively at: promoting the sharing of proceedings and results of the participatory approaches to research developed worldwide, reflecting the commitment to democracy and social justice to the dignity of individuals and communities, to the promotion of sustainability on Earth and to the promotion of peace and reconciliation between people and nations (4); also to dialogically connect interested people and researchers of the different theoretical and methodological frameworks and different approaches to research that are characterised by a relation between research, participation and action (5).

Considering the objectives proposed, especially the two presented above, the conference covered five thematic lines: (1) Participatory methodologies and epistemological issues, approaching both the legitimacy and the validity of cultural and intercultural modes of construction of knowledge worldwide, emphasising their diversity. This theme sought to problematise, among other issues, the types of data that could be obtained by means of participatory methodologies; the multiple aspects involved in the process of rendering a participatory methodology; the positioning on the academic allegation that participatory research is biased; (2) Transforming practices and policies, a line that, beginning with the connection between participatory investigation and the generation of knowledge for understanding reality and social change questioned, for instance, how the professionals could participate in the research processes in order to better understand and transform their practices, and how this can promote their political framework; (3) Promotion of the development of the community, educating popular movements, considering that people can improve their situation by knowing and analysing their own living conditions. These themes attempted to ask about the role played by the local activities regarding problems such as discrimination and social injustice, and also forms of expressing solidarity in the processes of community development through participatory actions; (4) Participatory approaches for the resolution of con-

1 Site of the event: Available at: <http://www.arna2017.unal.edu.co/> accessed on Mar.2018.

2 Currently it is organized as a political party, maintaining the same acronym, but with a new name: *Fuerzas Alternativas Revolucionarias del Común* (FARC).

flicts and reconciliation, a theme directed mainly at the Colombian context, which questions how it would be possible to achieve reconciliation, and the role of research participating in this process, experimenting with new forms of interaction; and (5), Alternative globalisation in a sustainable world, based on the idea that globalisation is not merely free world markets for goods and labor, but also covers sharing wealth and knowledges. It problematises individuals, contexts and intentionalities involved in the production of knowledge when facing a challenging future in terms of hope and sustainability. Could we be advancing or retreating in this sense?

A large part of the questions previously elaborated by the conference organisers, contained in its planning, were perceived at the presentations and debates that occurred in the form of discussion panels, workshops and parallel sessions during the event³. Highlighting the work of the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, it was also emphasised that participation and action are definitively brought closer in the form of the *Investigación Acción Participativa* (IAP). Affirmatively, we identified the presence of a concept of IAP characterised as a process of transformation, based on critical knowledge, constructed in such a way as to break with the hegemonic epistemological tradition. This process, identified with the liberating utopia, may be developed by multiple ruptures with the normative and impositive authoritarian tradition (colonial, patriarchal, capitalist) of the *world system*. Participation in the elaboration of knowledge on social issues is essential. As proposed by popular education, the active involvement of subjects in coping with their problems should be taken as an elementary challenge for a liberation project.

We followed the conference attentively, attempting to record the recurrent topics, the challenges that announced immediate coping, both old and new, as well as the reflections provoked in the different and multiple contexts of dialogue. One of these records was composed by a set of words⁴, taken down since the opening ceremony, going through the dialogues and closing of the final works of the conference. From these words and other reflections that we registered, we extracted elements considered representative of the entire event, connected directly to the focus of its implementation and purpose, which are reported below.

3 In the Program of "Day 1", in the Main Dialogue ": *Space –time of this new meeting*, the following special guests participated:: Alfredo Molano (Colombia), Victor Negrete (Colombia) and Lola Cendales (Colombia) and as moderator Normando Suárez (Colombia); in the Program of "Day 2", in the Main Dialogue 2: *Epistemological and political issues in the new convergence*, the special guests were: Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Portugal), María Teresa Castillo (Mexico); Carlos Rodrigues Brandão (Brazil) and as moderator Oscar Jara Holliday (Costa Rica); in the Program of "Day 3", in Main Dialogue 3: *Participatory approaches and democratization of knowledge*, the special guests were Joanne Rappaport (USA), John Elliot (United Kingdom), Michelle Fine (USA) and as moderator Lonnie Rowell (USA).

4 Fifty-two words were listed, namely: Action; Agency; Art; Autonomy; Peasant; Coherence; Commitment; Community; Connections; Conflict; Knowledge; Contradiction; Counter hegemony; Heart/Coração; Everyday; Criticism; Dialogue; Dignity; Emancipation; Epistemology; School of Peace; Listening; Hope; Esthetics; Ethics; Feminism; Joy(immanent); Iconoclasy (radical); Ideology; Insurgent/Insurgency; Cognitive Justice/Epistemic Justice; Freedom; Mystique; Change; Women; Politics; Practice; Process; Root; Rebel/Rebelliousness; Resistance; Rupture; Thinking/feeling (sentipensante); Solidarity; Subversion; Subjects (political); Territoriality; Transformation; Transgression; University; Utopia; Violence.

Emerging themes

The proposal of paths that lead to the consolidation of transforming principles/values, such as coherence, dignity, hope, solidarity, justice (cognitive, social...), freedom and others, was emphasised. The elaboration of transforming alternatives is not the work of isolated subjects, but of groups that are identified by world view, projects and ideologies that are somehow connected. Confronted in isolation, besides provoking little impact, they can be classified as absurd, marginal, and not providing the necessary support. However, in the collective dimension, the situation changes a lot, the shared problematisation and confrontation add quality, reinforcing the actions besides leading other subjects with similar attitudes and ideals to adhere.

Decolonisation as a political, ethical and aesthetic commitment of subjects who are solidary with their cultures and territories, assuming rebelliousness (fair anger) and subverting the colonial values. Fals Borda bet on a kind of own and popular science centered on community knowledge. The IAP presents a transgressive set of conventional principles of research and approach to the social reality, centred mainly on the rupture with classical disciplinary research and on a clash with the colonialist tradition of Latin America. It does not confer primacy on the academic way of knowing, because it seeks to answer, previously, what are the reasons and who will benefit from the research. The place of knowledge is displaced from the academy to the popular spaces, affirmatively enhancing the value of culture and people's knowledges, with which the academy does not often hold a dialogue. There is no value in itself if the investigation, even involving forms of participation, is not directly at the service of popular causes. The commitment reflects an elementary characteristic of this approach, especially by the researchers in solidarity with the other subjects. Therefore, the event enabled confronting the colonialist culture that is historically rooted in Latin American societies, affirming horizontality, in opposition to verticality of the colonial power relations.

Problematisation regarding the possible advances regarding participation, based on the experiences and studies presented and debated at the Congress If what research aims at is to learn more about reality, it is a matter of defining a specific claim of truth on which one operates from a given epistemological perspective. According to the speeches that we followed, this perspective will always be identified with a project of social transformation, designing the political character that constitutes it, refuting the principle of neutrality. The problematisation of reality occurs when the look, filled with curiosity, frames a certain existential dimension, understanding in another way what was formerly considered natural, reified. Once the problem has been sized, it remains to seek a more profound understanding and the respective coping which necessarily involves the construction and reconstruction of knowledge by means of the increasingly radical participation (authentically knowing is to know with, thus participation implies commitment). It is in this direction that we highlight the idea, launched at the conference, of bringing back values and characteristics of the original peoples, such as the indigenous ones, that are universal and at the same time reference our existence in the Americas historically. The redefinition of the forms of action of social movements and political parties was also emphasised. They were considered protagonists and formers (or not) of a participatory and active attitude of the social subjects. This is a

matter of problematising democracy permanently, seeking to complement the representative dimensions of participation with direct ones.

The role of universities and their subjects: transgression and epistemological rupture through transforming thoughts and practices. The “thinking-feeling being” and the “revolution of ideas”, expressions that were strongly used at the conference, bring one to a rupture with the Cartesian tradition that separates reason and emotion. In the face of this understanding, there is an integrating concept between thinking and feeling, that constitute the human beings conceived as a mystic force and existential totality. The impersonality of the objective and quantitative criteria of hegemonic science tend to be surpassed by the dialogical approach of everyone, sustained by the mutual commitment to reality. Without designing a rigid set of normative principles, doing participatory research and education is considered a courageous bet on the uncertainty that permanently permeates open processes. Without a single direction, these processes easily contradict and become distant from the institutional arrangement, especially the academic one and its hegemonic form of producing knowledge. Therefore, not infrequently they are academically marginalised, leading their protagonists to other meanders of transgression, which is their trademark. Similarly to what happens with popular education in relation to formal education, participatory research in its different forms of implementation clashes with institutional limits, true obstacles to be dealt with. However, based on the conviction that the transformation of reality depends on the transgressive posture of the subjects in relation to the conservative tradition, it is necessary to continue problematising processes and promoting displacements, which announce new possibilities.

Systematization as production of knowledge regarding transformation practices Although *Investigación Acción Participativa* (IAP) is considered pioneering within the current of participatory methodologies in Latin America, the 2017 Congress enabled us to confirm the existence of a range of research proposals inspired by the so called foundational matrix. One of them is the so-called *systematisation of practices* or *systematisation of experiences*, a modality of knowledge production that was gestated in social work and has been under development together with popular education in response to several needs, such as: rendering visible the transformations generated by organisational practices, social projects and collective actions; recognising and consolidating the knowledge generated by these practices; a better understanding of the practices and projects of social transformation in order to strengthen them; contributing to the construction of the theory and critical thinking; and communicating to other collectives the knowledge and learning produced. In order to cope with these demands of the social organisations and processes, simultaneously in several countries of Latin America, complementary proposals arose that contributed to the construction of these methodologies that allow the production of systematic knowledge about social practices from the experience and knowledge of its protagonists based on their reconstruction, analysis and critical interpretation. There is also a consensus in the recovery of experiences about the shared practices which responds to the collective production of narratives about them, as well as the dialogical reflection on them. During the time of the ARNA congress, more than one hundred papers were presented resulting from systematisations in many different fields of action, such as adult education, formal education with children and youths, popular education, community work, public health and organisational processes.

Some of them show great creativity in using participatory strategies and techniques that serve visual and theatrical expression, group dynamics and social cartography.

Epistemology from below. Resistance, insurgence and transgression. There were recurring references to the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire⁵, 1968), to a popular science and intellectual colonialism (Fals Borda⁶, 1970) and to liberation theology (Gutierrez⁷, 1971), considering their impact, actuality and relevance. The main criticism may have come from Boaventura de Sousa Santos⁸ who, during his exposition in the Main Dialogue 2- Epistemological and political issues in the new convergences, held on the second day of the congress, referred to the fact that Popular Education has lost insurgent force, since experiences have been systematised, but not enough has been disseminated. According to him, knowledge is a practice of life itself, and therefore, the practice of knowledges (wisdom). We can consider that, in general, the atmosphere of the congress covered the relationship between knowledge-life; in another way, it can also be considered that shared experiences acted against the “death of knowledge”, which so pulsates in the colonial-imperial-patriarchal system. In practice one could perceive the call to “occupy the concept of epistemology” claimed by Sousa Santos at this discussion panel. However, there is a challenge to popular social movements: the production of a science that can articulate the anti-capitalist, anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal struggle; Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda and Gustavo Gutierrez knew both how to interpret their own time and to go beyond it based on a different understanding of science, on an education that values popular culture and a theology of praxis. According to Sousa Santos, capitalism managed to become unified, whereas the social movements of the world became divided in the construction of procedures to validate the knowledge of the dominated groups. Nevertheless, popular education is still a reference. He proposes that the ecology of knowledge also be so, as well as the decolonisation of the university.

Maria Teresa Castilho-Burguette⁹ emphasises that women have been stigmatised, humiliated, tortured and declared guilty of “witchcraft” since the 16th century, and that they have been condemned for the knowledge transmitted by generations of cooks, medicine

5 Paulo Freire was born in Recife, Pernambuco, on September 19, 1921 and died in São Paulo on May 2, 1997; he was a Brazilian educator acknowledged for his contributions to critical education, especially, according to what we know as *popular education*, based on a method and an epistemology aiming to free men and women. Pedagogy of the oppressed is the most important of his vast work, and this year is its 50th anniversary..

6 Orlando Fals Borda was born in Barranquilla on July 11, 1925 and died in Bogotá on August 12, 2008; a Colombian sociologist acknowledged for his contributions to qualitative research, proposing participation and action in his methodological processes; he advocated a science that was committed to the popular causes, in brief, a *popular science*. *Ciencia propia y colonialismo intelectual* (1970) and *Historia doble de la costa* (1979) became classics of Latin American sociology.

7 Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino was born in Lima on June 8, 1928; Peruvian philosopher and theologian, one of the main referents of *liberation theology* in Latin America which joins together faith and politics. In a conference at the II Encuentro de Sacerdotes y Laicos held in Chimbote, Peru, in 1968, he presented his theological proposal: “Hacia una teología de la liberación”; *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* was published in 1971 and is considered the main reference in the liberating praxis of theology.

8 Boaventura de Sousa Santos is the director of project ALICE- reinvenção da emancipação social (<http://alice.ces.uc.pt/en/index.php/about/where-does-alice-come-from/?lang=pt>), Retired Full Professor of Faculdade de Economia at the Universidade de Coimbra and director of Centro de Estudos Sociais (CES) of the Universidade de Coimbra.

9 Researcher who performs studies on community participation, gender relations and use of resources.

women, peasant women, caretakers, midwives, in other words, people who held and knew the past. The arrival of women in science, although late, has been necessary to include the “female look” to change the structure of the “scientific doing”. In the approach by this researcher, attention is called to the fact that science has a gender, just as the topics and objects of investigation show a certain cultural asymmetry of gender in science. However, there is still a challenge: “To give a voice to those who have no voices” The criticism of a science which stands apart from the people, calls for the construction of bridges by *listening* since the “voices have not been very audible”. Based on this perspective, we might think that criticism of science also requires the disposition to *listen* and openness to processes of sharing, and of generating them from the experience of women, of this collective subject. We can identify the potency between knowledge and transformation, between epistemology and pedagogy (“others”), and between the voices and looks of the excluded.

Finally, we must record the marked absences of a large part of the subjects present in the reports throughout the conference, such as the indigenous peoples and *campesinos* (peasants). These absences symbolise a contradictory dimension of an event that affirms, discursively, participation and also the principles of solidarity, of hope and of confrontation with the colonial logic. Confronting the belief that popular culture knowledge are minor sustains the option for them as fundamentals of another epistemology, directed to social transformation. However, at the same time it reproduces the linear and excluding functioning that characterises the academic context.

The main discussion panel 3: *Participatory approaches and the democratisation of knowledge* clearly showed this contradiction. Michelle Fine¹⁰, a researcher invited to hold one of the talks, created a space for these silenced voices. “Javier”, a Colombian researcher, was invited to be seated and issued an important message: “whites have taught me that I’m different: I’m non-white”, ie., a forceful call to the fact that convergences need to take place within the sphere of *human dignity*. Thus, an urgent challenge is spelled out to the conference itself: taking up, in the concreteness of its practice, the discourse that it sustains, under the risk of making even more fragile this space-time that is so rich in dialogue and critical reflection.

Research and the sociopolitical context: In Latin America and other parts of the world, there is a wave of conservative movements through which new and old forms of domination and exclusion are expressed and justified, ranging from xenophobia to the exploitation of work in semi-slavery modes. It appears that in these contexts action research in its different modalities is recovering its insurgent and transgressive force. This can be perceived in several aspects of the research, of which a few of the main ones are: 1) A radicalisation of the production of knowledge among subjects imbued with the intentionality of transforming their realities while knowing, and getting to know transforming. There is an awareness that the new insurgent practices require seeking new languages to gain a better understanding of them and to plan alternatives. 2) Action research or participatory research, when performed together with the practices, renders territoriality concrete. These are concrete men, women, families and communities that experience concrete situations which

10 Professor and researcher in the field of critical psychology, women studies, American studies and urban education. She considers herself an activist of education, and works and investigates topics regarding social justice with youths, women and men in a situation in which they are deprived of freedom.

they seek strategies to surpass through knowledge. 3) Looking at the practices, we also see the importance of valuing ruptures that, seen in themselves, may appear small or insignificant, but within a broader historical process they have the potential to signal new paths for social and political action.

As already pointed out before, the fact that the conference was held in Colombia certainly contributed to placing in the forefront the issue of participation and democratisation of knowledge in a context of convergences for reconciliation. For this, those present were called to focus on what unites them to deal with the forces that promote the fragmentation of social struggles. These convergences make themselves visible in various spheres. The most evident is the search for epistemological convergences that are present in expressions such as ecology of knowledge and dialogue of knowledge. This refers both the convergence between classical disciplines of the academic curricula, and the relationship with knowledges that are developed outside the academic world. Another important convergence is that of the modalities of research that compose the action research family, taking on different forms and names, such as participatory research, IAP, systematisation of experiences, community based research, militant research and others. Finally, it is the convergence of restless actors who ask questions in the style of those that Paulo Freire asked exactly 50 years ago, when he published “*Pedagogy of the oppressed*” (1968) and asked himself about the possibilities of humanisation:

“Once again men (sic!)¹¹, challenged by the drama of the current time, propose themselves as a problem. They discover that they know little about themselves, about their ‘place in the cosmos’, and are concerned with knowing more. Actually, one of the reasons for this search is the acknowledgment that they know little about themselves. On installing themselves in the quasi, if not tragic discovery of how little they know about themselves, they transform themselves into a problem. They ask, they answer and their answers lead them to new questions”¹² (Freire, 1981, p. 29).

Final considerations

In the main dialogue 1: *Space –time of this new meeting*, we were able to watch a video interview with Orlando Fals Borda, in which he reaffirmed the committed character of the IAP with the oppressed and exploited peoples. The research should be based on the *solidarity* learned from the indigenous peoples in the relationship with nature; in the *dignity* of the political struggle of the peasants; in the *autonomy* of the mixed blood *settlers*, and in the *freedom* of the black people. Not being only a set of techniques to act or participate, the IAP, or “reverse research”, as Carlos Rodrigues Brandão¹³, would tell us, “is a philosophy of life, in which the IAP, that implements it, is a thinking/feeling entity that knows how to

11 Later Paulo Freire will perform self-criticism of the male chauvinist language of his first books.

12 Freire, Paulo (1981). *Pedagogia do oprimido*. 9.ed. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra. This excerpt is the second paragraph of Chapter I, which was not translated in the English-language version of 1972, published by Herder and Herder, of New York.

13 Professor Emeritus of Unicamp, Brazil, he is acknowledged for his career as an educator, anthropologist, environmentalist and poet and is considered one of the “pioneers of popular education”..

combine the heart and mind, and knows how to exert empathy and not only sympathy to others, and to us, that respects the differences and even appreciates them”¹⁴.

For whom is our research relevant? For what? Social transformation, in what sense? Is the method compatible with the object to be known? Being consistent is still a great challenge for all of us. The words of Orlando Fals Borda continue to live since the first meeting, in the same Cartagena de Índias, in 1977. However, a small message pulsates among us. At the 1st Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy, in 2017, at the end of the ARNA Congress, the Indian researcher Rajesh Tandon calls attention: “Within the economy of knowledge, we are the elite, even if we are workers of knowledge. There are many others who are not represented in this room. We change by acting and not by thinking about reality. Instead of cognitive justice, we should talk about epistemic justice”. In this sense, the IAP continues to be a major reference in the decolonisation of knowledge, in its production, and in its fair distribution, until a new society and a new university are achieved. In the words of Fals Borda: “combining a well done investigation with well done action, praxis, and with a well done authentic participation establishes the foundations of a new university and a new society”¹⁵.

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14 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=op6qVGOGinU>. Accessed on Mar 27, 2018.

15 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=op6qVGOGinU>. Accessed on Mar 27, 2018.

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