

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) AND DECOLONIAL STUDIES: CRITICAL MIRRORS

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ORIGINAL TITLE

Action Research and Decolonial Practices:  
Necessities and Impossibilities

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and decolonial studies compose an ample set of Latin American theoretical-practical expressions, situated between academia and activism. In both cases, we find an explicit positioning against the dominant epistemic, political and cultural forms, as well as a field of thinking and action oriented towards the transformation of capitalist and colonialist structures of power. In the following lines, I will present some of the principal ideas that configure PAR and decolonial studies. I will succinctly indicate some complementary differences between the two, as well as the limits and the potential that springs from bringing these two together, both in discourse and practice. The length of this document does not permit me to go deeper into the ideas presented, hence I propose these ideas be utilized as clues for further critical reflection.

## PAR AND DECOLONIAL STUDIES: A VERY BRIEF CONTEXT

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a political-epistemic approach that appeared in the 1960s from the critical review developed by Orlando Fals Borda.<sup>14</sup> His criticism centered on the ways social knowledge was produced in Colombia. Five decades have passed, and today PAR constitutes an ample field of experiences marked by a diversity of perspectives and applications.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast with the foundations that sustain conventional academic

<sup>14</sup> Orlando Fals-Borda, *Ciencia propia y colonialismo intelectual* (Bogotá: Carlos Valencia, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Ezequiel Ander-Egg, *Metodología y práctica de la animación sociocultural* (Madrid: Marciego, 1981); Tomás Villasante, *La investigación social participativa. Construyendo ciudadanía* (Madrid: El Viejo Topo, 2002).

discourses and methods, PAR is based on the following principles:

- Academic implication: The researcher makes his ethical-political views of reality explicit and assumes his participation in collective practices oriented to social justice.
- Non-objectification: The subjects are not “objects of study.” The PAR approach generates a subject-subject relation between the researcher and the other people involved in the research process and social action.
- A common agenda: There are procedures set in place for listening to each individual as well as the collective. These procedures are structured as well as non-structured, and are used to identify local needs and to collectively create the agenda for research and action.
- A dialogue of knowledge: Knowledge and collective actions are built by way of direct participation of the people from different social sectors and classes, and/or different cultures.
- Social power: The objective is to alter power structures and transform social reality from collective action and knowledge.

Fals-Borda defines PAR as “a process open to life and work, a progressive evolution towards structural transformation of society and culture,” because of the way it marries academic work and social participation. <sup>16</sup>Therefore, it is “a process that requires engagement, an ethical stance, and persistence at all levels.” <sup>17</sup>The author states that as much as PAR is a methodological approach, it is also a “philosophy of life.” <sup>18</sup>

Fals-Borda, inspired by the people of San Jorge, would say that to understand PAR as a philosophy of life can signify, among other things, the impossibility to establish rigid limits between what we do, what we think, and what we “think-feel,” and how we position ourselves ethically

<sup>16</sup> Orlando Fals-Borda, *Acción y conocimiento: Cómo romper el monopolio con la investigación acción participativa* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1991), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

and politically towards the world. <sup>19</sup>In this sense, to do research with others is not reduced to an epistemological or methodological affair, since it is also about transforming unequal, competitive, and excluding relations in order to create new social realities. Academia, politics, and ethics are intertwined in the same collective construction process of power-knowledge, solidarity, creativity, and transformation.

The critical and constructive view of PAR finds in the decolonial perspective a great ally. These two Latin American perspectives have developed independently of each other, configuring different discursive and practical approaches, though both are committed to social movements and the transformation of power structures. Like PAR, decolonial studies are characterized by a diversity of current perspectives.<sup>20</sup>

In general, the decolonial approach states, colonialism works in all dimensions of individual and collective life. To understand colonialism’s *modus operandi*, and to create alternatives, Catherine Walsh proposed the analysis of four interconnected axis, which I present below, including other author’s voices:<sup>21</sup>

- The colonality of power: This concept refers to the system of social classification based on categories of race, class, and gender as criteria for the distribution of power, domination and exploitation of the population in a global capitalist structure.<sup>22</sup>
- The colonality of knowledge: This concept positions eurocentrism as the exclusive order of reason, knowledge and thought, disqualifying or excluding other rationalities, other

<sup>19</sup> Orlando Fals-Borda, *Resistencia en el San Jorge* (Bogotá: Carlos Valencia, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Edgardo Lander, *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas Latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000); Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina,” in *La colonialidad del ser: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas Latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires, CLACSO). Walter Dignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press); Arturo Escobar, *Sentipensar con la tierra. Nuevas lecturas sobre desarrollo, territorio y diferencia* (Medellín: Ediciones Unala, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Catherine Walsh, *Interculturalidad, Estado Y Sociedad: Luchas (De)Coloniales De Nuestra Época* (Ecuador: Absya-Ayala, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Estado-nación y ‘movimientos indígenas’ en la región Andina. Cuestiones abiertas,” *Movimientos sociales y gobiernos en la región andina. Resistencias y alternativas, Lo político y lo social*. *Revista del Observatorio Social de América Latina* 8, no.19 (2006): 15-24.

types of knowledge and ways of knowing that are not those of the white European or Europeanized men.<sup>23</sup>

- The coloniality of being: Power exercised by making others feel inferior and therefore dehumanized. This generates what Frantz Fanon calls “non-existence.”<sup>24</sup> It makes people doubt the value of colonized subjects, producing what Maldonado-Torres calls “racial dehumanization of modernity.”<sup>25</sup>
- The coloniality of mother earth: This axis is based on the binary division nature/society, body/mind, emotions/thoughts. The planet gives us resources whose value can be reduced to the economic. It overlooks the sensitive and spiritual, it ignores the millennial relation between the geo-bio-physical, the human, and the intangible.<sup>26</sup>

With these and other reflective frameworks, decolonial thought offers conceptual tools for action and transformation of the instituted powers. It also helps reestablish academic work from an ethical-political and self-critical perspective. In this sense, there are many points of convergence with PAR. Other similarities, differences, limits and potentialities that mark the relation between these two perspectives are explored in what follows.

## MIRRORING: BUILDING COMPLEMENTARY CRITIQUE

I propose to start off by mirroring. One perspective can reflect the differences from the other in order to construct new possible images. To make myself clear, I do not wish to establish a detailed comparison,

<sup>23</sup> Boaventura S. Santos, *Descolonizar el saber, reinventar el poder* (Montevideo, Trilce Editorial, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Los condenados de la tierra* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Sobre la colonialidad del ser: contribuciones al desarrollo de un concepto,” in *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*, ed. Santiago Castro-Gómez y Ramón Grosfoguel (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre, 2007), 133.

<sup>26</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Sentipensar con la tierra. Nuevas lecturas sobre desarrollo, territorio y diferencia* (Medellín: Ediciones Unaula, 2014).

but to identify closeness and distance between PAR and decolonial studies, signals and clues that operate more as points of departure, not final goals.

Before we start this game, we must admit at least three of the multiple problems and conditions of this proposal:

- 1 Generalization: Considering the diversity of variants in both perspectives, it is important to recognize that this exercise is based on general notions (like those explored in the first part of this text) and, therefore, the game will be marked by superficial and limited statements.
- 2 Partiality: This exercise will be partial in two ways. On the one hand, it refers to a small part of the whole, it is selective, without the pretense of going through all the ideas that emerge from the encounter between PAR and decolonial studies. On the other hand, it implies that I, the author, write from a particular and subjective stance, although not arbitrarily.
- 3 Fallibility: For the reasons already mentioned, it is probable that this comparative exercise is fragile and fallible, especially when examined through the lenses of our own concrete experiences.

I suggest that, being conscious of these and other difficulties and risks, we start the game of mirroring between these two perspectives to see one side and the other.

## PAR USES DECOLONIAL STUDIES AS ITS MIRROR: WHAT DOES PAR SEE?

Does PAR see tyranny of participation and colonization through democracy? Decolonial studies help intensify an important tension between the ethical-political and methodological character of PAR. This tension veils, on the one hand, the non-conformity towards prevailing injustice and the subsequent decision to know-act in favor of social transformation, and, on the other hand, knowledge and respect of the diverse ways of life and social organization. In sum, this tension sheds

light on conceptual and material differences between political inequality and cultural diversity. From here the following queries: Can PAR act imposingly and insensibly towards different socio-cultural realities, even if it is essentially inclusive and participatory? Can PAR impose social organizational processes that annihilate social-cultural diversity through its participatory procedures? It is probable that these queries are not very present among the PAR participants that are dedicated to urban marginalized contexts where political inequality is not as marked by the diversity of traditional ways of collective life. However, these questions that interpolate participatory action research from a decolonial focus help feed a self-critical vigilance necessary in processes committed to social justice.

#### *Critical-ethnography and Autoethnography's Contributions to PAR*

Another important complement to PAR is the integration of ethnographic and autoethnographic processes derived from the anthropological (self) critical and decolonial tradition. Although PAR practitioners usually start with processes of listening to the involved actors in the context of study and action, ethnographic knowledge and training may result in processes of co-constructed knowledge and power. One of the hurdles in this case is the principle of non-objectification of the subjects collaborating in PAR processes. Ethnographic practice in this case would not be based on "informants" nor on the study of "subjects," but based on a process of common constructions of the individual-collective history and the context of reflective-action. Autoethnography offers PAR instruments for self-analysis that are necessary in order to explicitly self-critique the place that one occupies in social reality (culture, gender, class, occupation, age, range of power, etc.) and the tensions and contradictions that accompany the concept of place.

## **DECOLONIAL STUDIES USE PAR AS THEIR MIRROR: WHAT DOES DECOLONIAL STUDIES SEE?**

### *A Certain Academic Posture that is Contradictorily Excluding*

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Julieta Paredes<sup>27</sup> have denounced the academic or canonical character of decolonial studies. They have also called out the concept of decoloniality as a noun and not as a process (decolonization). The first author demonstrates her non-conformity to celebrated authors who consistently exclude indigenous intellectuals from their writing. Though we may genuinely criticize many productions of PAR for their lack of theory, it is also fitting that mirroring decolonial theory, PAR (with its experience in dialogues of knowledge and processes/products of collective writing) reflects the possible epistemic monopoly of the academic institution.

### *Little Action*

As cited by a friend who does not remember the author's name: "there is nothing more practical than a good theory."<sup>28</sup>The concrete effects derived from theory can be many and diverse. Without ignoring the importance of theory, decolonial thinkers can find in PAR the invitation to practical experiences with other subjects and shared processes of decolonization. In fact, decolonial sensitivity and reflection articulated with collective processes of research for social transformation yield a potent set for action-reflection.

<sup>27</sup> Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "La raíz: colonizadores y colonizados," in *Violencias encubiertas en Bolivia* (La Paz: CIPCA-ARUWIYIRI, 1993); Rivera Cusicanqui, J. Domingues, Arturo Escobar and Enrique Leff, "Debate sobre el colonialismo intelectual y los dilemas de la teoría social latinoamericana," *Cuestiones de Sociología*, 14, e009. Retrieved from <http://www.cuestionessociologia.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/CSn14a09>; and Julieta Paredes, *Despatriarcalización* (Bolivia: Bolivian Studies Journal, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers* (London: Tavistock, 1952).

## BY WAY OF (IN)CLUSIÓN: SHARED LIMITS AND POTENTIALITIES

There are many ways in which academia contributes to the capitalist-colonial system. It is characterized, in part, by the production of knowledge for the market, the power to render other epistemologies invisible, the power to limit intellectual work to the elite and to deterritorialize schooled subjects. Notwithstanding PAR's and decolonial studies' commitments to social anti-hegemonic processes, we cannot ignore that each also responds to disciplinary slants, demands and institutional/academic logics of which they are products. In this sense, the efforts to build an Other academia are necessarily skewed by contradictions, as well as by the risk of ingenuity and the instrumental use of social research.

Maybe another fundamental characteristic shared by practitioners of PAR and decolonial research is honesty (or at least the pursuit of honesty) in their reflective processes. Leyva and Speed suggest "both approaches struggle to exteriorize, admit and systematize the contradictions and tensions carried by the process of research, instead of hiding them, dissimulating them or ignoring them."<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Hale proposes that these tensions can turn into objects of collective analysis in collaborative research processes, in order to convert them into new sources of collective knowledge and new research relations—in the case of PAR, this becomes essential for the construction of an effective collective power.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, notwithstanding the contradictions inherent in the academic practices of PAR and decolonial studies, to wager on these approaches marks a position that is open to self-critique, to shared critique, and, most importantly, to relations—with oneself, with other people, and with the world—where we experience ways of being other than those offered/ made possible by capitalism and colonialism. ■

<sup>29</sup> Xochitl Leyva Solano and Shannon Speed, "Hacia la investigación descolonizada: nuestra experiencia de co-labor," in *Gobernar (en) la diversidad: Experiencias indígenas desde América Latina*, ed. Xochitl Leyva Solano, Araceli Burguete y Shannon Speed (Mexico: La Casa Chata, 2008), 84.

<sup>30</sup> As cited in Leyva Solano and Speed, "Hacia la investigación descolonizada: nuestra experiencia de co-labor," 84.