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In search of the ontology of participation in Participatory Action Research: Orlando Fals-Borda's Participatory Turn, 1977–1980

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Abstract

When did sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda name his method Participatory Action Research (PAR), and what were the epistemological implications of this shift from action research to PAR? To address these questions, this article critically examines Fals-Borda's 'participatory turn'—his epistemological shift from orthodox Marxism to the participatory paradigm—, which squarely underpinned the origins of PAR yet has hitherto remained unexplored in the literature. The article focuses on Fals-Borda's transition from participation “by” to participation “with” the people, which occurred during a period of intense self-criticism after years of radical activism. Drawing on exhaustive archival research, it examines the collaborative systematisation of his method alongside an emerging constellation of participatory research practices. Thereby, it highlights the centrality of collaboration to the development of his work and demonstrates that Fals-Borda's embrace of the participatory paradigm stemmed from rejecting the centrality of historical materialism in favour of a model of research which supports and sustains the conditions for collective analysis and action through harnessing the creativity and wisdom of marginalized peoples. It concludes that for all the innovations in tools and techniques of action-oriented methods, the ontology of participation is what fundamentally differentiates PAR from other instrumental or top-down forms of people's participation in research.

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Keywords

Participatory action research, action research, orlando fals borda, participatory research, participatory turn

Introduction

As institutions rush to design, fund and implement research which is explicitly ‘participatory’, though all-too-often in the pursuit of non-participatory ends, it is a pertinent moment to examine the ontology of participation in Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR sprang out of radical action research, which in turn grew out of a constellation of research practitioners concerned by the failure of social science to grapple with the enduring conditions of exploitation and poverty across the Global South. Ensuring people’s participation in that research was a tool for social transformation, and led to the proliferation of participatory methodologies.

Although such methods have since faced strong criticism as paternalistic (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 1987), with some arguing that ‘participation’ has become a new ‘tyranny’ (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; cf. Greenwood et al., 1993; Hickey & Mohan 2004), the work of scholars such as Fals-Borda and Paulo Freire have come to be seen as important, although for some now outdated, examples of ‘the epistemologies of the South’ (Santos, 2018).¹ Such criticism often reflects two interconnected factors. The first is that participatory approaches such as PAR and Chambers’ (1994) participatory rural appraisal (PRA) have been increasingly appropriated by international aid organisations and banks and hence used as practical tool in advancing development projects. As such, these critiques rather than being directed against people’s participation in research are about the implementation of development using PRA (Swantz, 2016: 52). The second and complementary factor is that contemporary literature on PAR tends to overlook the history of the origins of PAR, and lacks an empirically grounded account of how PAR was practiced in the 1970s and 80s in Colombia (Oslender, 2014; Rappaport, 2020) and more broadly in the Global South (Dubell, Erasmie & Vries, 1981; Swantz, 2016; Tandon & Hall, 2014).

To robustly engage with the critiques of PAR and overcome the general amnesia about the origins of PAR and its propagation across the world, this article examines Fals-Borda’s epistemological shift from historical materialism to the participatory paradigm (what this article calls the ‘participatory turn’), a turn reminiscent of his earlier break with positivism. The distinctive aspect of Fals-Borda’s participatory turn is its radical but also collaborative and dialogical nature. Consequently, this article looks at the convergence of “multiple epistemological voices” that, as Bradbury (2015, p. 6) explains, accompanies the emergence of alternative paradigms of transformational knowledge creation.

Building on Fals-Borda’s collaboration with pioneers of PR such as Budd Hall, Vio Grossi and Anisur Rahman, among others, it argues that Fals-Borda’s resultant ‘ontology of participation’ is best viewed as a processual shift from a participatory model *for* the people, to one carried out *by* the people, to one where the researcher works *with* the people (Cornwall, 2000; see also Tandon & Kak, 2007).

Fals-Borda's ideas and practice of participation *for* the people can be identified in his pioneering research on rural sociology in Colombia (1955; 1957) and his works on rural development and agrarian reform whilst acting as Dean of the Faculty of Sociology and Vice-Ministry of Agriculture in the early 1960s (Rojas-Guerra, 2021). In collaboration with the priest and sociologist Camilo Torres, Fals-Borda also involved peasants and chanty-town dwellers to participate in institutional development programmes, which, at that time, was seen as revolutionary (Díaz, 2022; Moreno, 2017). The transition from participation *for* to participation *by* the people, which took the form of a struggle for social justice and more equitable distribution of land, coincided with Fals-Borda's writing on subversion and social change (1967, 1969) and the resignation of his professorship to join as a militant researcher the peasant movement in Colombia.

This article's focus is on Fals-Borda's shift from participation *by* the people to participation *with* the people, a transition that took place during a period of intense self-criticism after his years of radical activism. During this period, Fals-Borda grew increasingly distrustful of notions like 'science of the proletariat' and Mao's 'from the masses to the masses,' used by revolutionary cadres to foster popular mobilisation, with which he had sided in the early 1970s. As Fals-Borda (1983) admitted, his subsequent disengagement from US-supported reformism and radical-left militancy led him to an experimental period marked by 'epistemological deficits' (see also Rappaport, 2020, p. 42–43). However, these deficiencies are often uncritically ascribed to more mature elaborations on PAR in the 1980s (Rahman, 1983), which has resulted in narrow understandings of the ontology of participation in PAR. Relatedly, we are left asking what prevented Fals-Borda from incorporating 'participation' in his early theorisations on action research and, similarly, what precise constellation of experiences and relations led him to embrace the participatory paradigm at the core of his own method.

Through analysis of published and unpublished works, correspondence and first-hand interviews, this article both redresses this critical gap in the ontology of participatory social inquiry and contributes to the history of Latin American radical thinking through a detailed exploration of Fals-Borda's *participatory turn*. In doing so, it challenges three commonly accepted ideas about the origins of PAR. First is the argument that Fals-Borda presented a rather elaborated version of PAR at the 1977 Cartagena Symposium (Torres, 2019), to which some refer as the first symposium on PAR (Suárez, 2017, p. 414; Rappaport, 2020, p. 12). Second is the idea that the epistemology of PAR is mainly grounded in Fals-Borda's break with structural functionalism (Pereira, 2008; Santos, 2018). Third is the assertion that Fals-Borda simply introduced 'participation' to the already well-used 'action research' in order to accentuate the role of grassroots organisations in the co-production of knowledge (Rojas-Guerra, 2009). While undoubtedly relevant in shaping PAR as it later became, said explanations downplay the rather complex intellectual and practical evolution of Fals-Borda's thinking implied in the shift from participation *by* to participation *with* the people.

This article begins with an examination of Fals-Borda's early attempts to systematise action research, including 'participation-insertion' and 'the problem of praxis' underlying his 'science of the people'. Here the central contribution grapples with why an explicitly participatory component was not evident in his early writing on action research, yet later

emerged at the core of his method. It finds that his efforts concentrated in scientifically validating his practice as action researcher concern with social liberation, relegating ‘participation’ to the methodological domain.² The article then explores the significance of Fals-Borda’s international partnerships, including pioneers of participatory research elsewhere in the world, as well as how personal circumstances impacted the inception of PAR, such as the self-critique and others’ critical assessment of his role as militant researcher and the incarceration of his wife. Lastly, the article examines the intellectual context within which, despite his initial reticence to employ the term participation, he finally articulated the participatory paradigm, including his first recorded use of the term Participatory Action Research, before closing with some final remarks on the ontology of participation.

To conclude, a word on the author’s positionality. As a historian and practitioner of PAR myself, I was interested in addressing the following research question, which drew on but exceeded the scope of my PhD thesis (Díaz, 2017): When did Fals-Borda name his method PAR, and what were the epistemological implications of this shift from *just* action research to PAR? Whilst doing the archival research for this article, I was working as a postdoctoral researcher in the RCUK-funded research project Improbable Dialogues. As it developed, our project was confronted with the challenges of facilitating PAR remotely during the Covid pandemic. This way, my inquiry into the history of PAR unfolded in parallel with a dialogical process of collective reflection on the meaning of participation in PAR and its potential to engage with communities and mobilise efforts and sources to promote peace through social dialogue – even in circumstances in which being physically with the community was not possible. Thanks to the commitment of the research team and the impressive participatory work of local researchers and partner organisations in the field, the process of writing this article occurred in the rhythm of action-reflection.

Action research and participation by the people

Orlando Fals-Borda’s embrace of *investigación-acción* (action research)³ as a direct call for engaged researchers to support *campesino* (peasants) and working classes to better comprehend reality and articulate their struggle was a watershed moment in his intellectual history. The ‘problem of praxis’ encapsulates his search for robust conceptual underpinnings to support this vision of radical social change. This section deals with this early transition, which goes from his thoughts on subversion as a category of sociological analysis to his resignation from the Colombian National University to the creation of *La Rosca*, a radical partnership of like-minded scholars which embraced ‘participation-insertion’ as their guiding framework — a process which culminated with a symposium on action research. This event marks another crucial moment in Fals-Borda’s career as it provided him not only with a forum to critically analyse the main obstacles to the realization of his ‘science of the people’ but also with his first encounter with ‘participatory research’ then being conducted elsewhere in the world.

Militant research and participation-insertion

By the mid-1960s Fals-Borda, Dean of the Faculty of Sociology at the Colombian National University, was becoming increasingly frustrated with the failure of traditional politics to address entrenched rural poverty and deprivation. Colombia's bi-partisan power sharing arrangement, the National Front, 1958-74, was first envisioned as a "democratic convalescence" after a period of intense civil strife known as *La Violencia*, yet turned out to be "a symbol of aloofness and corruption" (Gutiérrez & Guataquí, 2009). Its failures were particularly apparent under President Pastrana, 1970-74, whose administration dismantled his predecessor's platform for agrarian reform intended to drive more equal land distribution (Zamosc, 1986).

Fals-Borda was equally dissatisfied with the failure of the regional policy solutions like the *Alliance for Progress* to promote rural justice. As Programme Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Fals-Borda (1971, p. 143) also detailed the failure of rural cooperatives — initially proposed as a "third way" between capitalism and socialism — to stimulate participation or self-reliance owing to entrenched and repressive systems of patron-client politics. Instead, he increasingly looked to movements like the *Ligas Camponesas* of northeast Brazil, where peasants were engaged as a social class and involved throughout in action necessary for structural transformation (Ibid, p. 146–7).

During Fals-Borda's 2-year commission at the UN, the Faculty of Sociology of the National University, which he had cofounded in 1959, reintroduced structural functionalism as its underpinning epistemological framework and dismantled programmes committed to meaningful transformation like the *Programa Latinoamericano de Estudios del Desarrollo* (Latin American Development Studies Program, PLEDES) — on which Fals-Borda wrote: "It practically means that a 10-year effort may have come to naught" (ACH-UN. FOFB. IAP, FR/RIAS, 04). His criticism of "objective science" and defence of engaged sociology was also apparent at a conference at the State University of New York in 1968, where he was asked to comment on an essay by U.S. political scientist Kalman Silvert (1970, p. 107). The essay offers a damning critique of Latin American social scientists for their "uninspiring state of disarray," and warns U.S. scholars against romantically surrendering to "a second-rate social science south of the Rio Grande," should they unquestioningly prioritise subaltern sectors as research subjects. Fals-Borda responded by vehemently stating that Latin American social scientists' shortcomings were not the result of a commitment to radical change but, instead, the naïve imitation of Western theories (1970, p. 125).

Given this conflagration of factors, Fals-Borda (1969) adopted the term *subversion* in explicit rejection of Colombia's (and wider) political elite, calling instead for the formation of a counter-elite as the basis of a mass resistance strategy (Rojas-Guerra, 2021). In 1970, he resigned his professorship to focus his militant research efforts on the Colombian Atlantic coast, where land conflicts and state repression were particularly intense (Zamosc, 1986, p. 51–2).

In December 1970, Fals-Borda — now an independent activist-scholar — established the Circle of Research and Social Action (*La Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social* –

hereafter *La Rosca*) along with a small group of Colombian collaborators, three of whom, including Fals-Borda himself, were Presbyterians. *La Rosca* members formally adopted ‘participation-insertion’ as their guiding methodological framework, at a time when ‘insertion among the poor’ had already become popular among liberation theologians, among them Fals-Borda’s close friend, the influential Presbyterian theologian Richard Shaull (Díaz, 2018, 2022). Participation-insertion essentially represented a break from traditional ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and participant experimentation (Fals-Borda, 1979: 36), and an open political commitment to *campesinos* and the working classes, whereby the researcher lives with and shares in the struggles of the community under study (Molano, 1978, p. xvi). This was explicitly complemented with the methodological aspects of historical materialism, which *La Rosca* sought to adapt to the Colombian reality (ACH-UN, FOFB, IAP, Rosca, 202); a decision which was less an ideological conversion than an attempt to develop a concrete praxis for acquiring deep knowledge of the local groups while advancing the peasant movement’s political agenda. Still, the concept remained somewhat poorly defined, embodied an asymmetric relationship between researcher and participants and — at its worst —subordinated the researcher’s goals to political expediency (Fals-Borda, 1979, p. 37).

While some have argued that Fals-Borda defined the contours of PAR during these years, evidence suggests he was sceptical about whether his activism as an action-researcher truly represented an epistemological breakthrough. In 1975, *La Rosca* closed down as the result of prolonged conflict with the Maoist left and ideological divisions in the peasant movement.⁴ After 3 years of intense activism, this represented a transition in Fals-Borda’s career, a period of systematisation and self-criticism. At the end of that year, he asked Argentinian sociologist Sergio Bagú to review an early evaluation of *La Rosca*’s work (Fals-Borda, 1975), in which he defined his approach as action research, instead of militant *or* engaged research, and contained no references to participation-insertion as methodological framework. For Bagú, *La Rosca*’s action research approach was critical, innovative and committed to the marginalized, yet fell short of establishing a coherent theoretical framework and methodology. More broadly, Bagú proffered two explanations for why this new generation of Latin American social scientists had seemingly reached an exhaustion point: they failed to successfully exploit the gains of social protest, and only superficially grappled with the theory-method dialectic. Fals-Borda’s response acknowledged little progress in developing a robust conceptual framework for his action research and further encapsulates the political — as opposed to technical — nature of the challenge of action-oriented research, as does later correspondence with Rodolfo Stavenhagen wherein he critiques progressive organisations’ limited engagement with scientific research (ACHUN, FOFB, RI, Mexico, 11). In other words, to bring about a subversive, radical social transformation, Fals-Borda saw a clear need for both theoretical development *and* widespread and direct engagement in empirical investigation: a science of the people.

Science of the people and the problem of praxis

Fals-Borda critically outlined his vision for a ‘science of the people’ during the 1977 International Sociological Association’s (ISA) symposium on Action Research and Scientific Analysis, held in Cartagena. This was a landmark event in the development of PAR and for the broader participatory movement: “To Cartagena came radical intellectuals from many parts of the world to debate new directions for the late 1970’s and 80’s” (Tandon & Hall, 2014, p. 7, p. 7). However, Fals-Borda’s contribution, *Investigating Reality in order to Transform It*, rarely mentions participation as a key component of his action research. Instead, he begins with a damning critique of structural functionalism, especially its presumption of objective neutrality and failure to question [colonialist] power (1979, p. 34–40; Pereira, 2016). Drawing on *La Rosca*’s engagement with grassroots organisations, he then evaluates the practical and theoretical issues at the interface of knowledge co-production and political action, before closing with a proposition for a ‘science of the people’ — by which he meant a ‘science of the proletariat’. This revolutionary praxis, he proffered, would support mass struggle by dismantling the traditional subject-object binomial through transforming people’s common sense into “good sense” (Ibid, p. 43–52).

Fals-Borda’s presentation constituted a self-critique of his praxis with the peasant movement by suggesting a number of interrelated obstacles which prevented the realization of his ‘science of the proletariat’. Firstly, he cited the “ontological problem”: that is, the challenge of supporting grassroots workers to “create and possess scientific knowledge ... capable of social transformation.” While this was theoretically feasible under the epistemological tenets of dialectical materialism, in the field it was action-researchers and their intellectual allies who defined the ontology of participation by transposing their preconceptions about reality onto their work. This, in turn, prevented key groups from coherently voicing their concerns and articulating knowledge in their own terms (Fals-Borda, 1979, p. 40). Secondly, proletarian science was assimilated to revolutionary class consciousness (Ibid, p. 46). As Rivera-Cusicanqui (1987, p. 49) and others have since elaborated, the “illusion of Marxism” — that is, the presumed explanatory power of historical materialism to uncover the roots of structural inequality across heterogeneous Latin American societies — contributed to vast, dogmatic over-generalisations regarding the relationship between research and social change. Thirdly, as Quijano (1978, p. 266) outlines, Fals-Borda’s proletarian science as well as other forms of radical action research combined leftist political ideology with traditional epistemologies that maintain the researched-researcher divide. This left Fals-Borda’s action research vulnerable to wider critiques, such as that of Oquist’s (1978, p. 161), wherein action research simply refers to any form of action-oriented inquiry, distinguishable only by their underlying (progressive or reactionary) values.

For all his efforts at conceptualising a ‘science of the people’, participation was evidently secondary to action at this stage in Fals-Borda’s intellectual development. Indeed, his 1977 contribution ultimately provided a critical assessment of ‘vanguard group’s praxis’ rather than ‘people praxis’ (Rahman, 1983: 8). Specifically, his decision to dedicate significant time to self-critique was conspicuously juxtaposed with only limited

concern for expanding on the methodologies and techniques developed in the field, through which he and his associates engaged with peasants and other proletarian groups in research endeavours.

If Fals-Borda expected that the Cartagena symposium would conclude with a commitment among attendees to a ‘critical and revolutionary’ research agenda, he was ultimately disappointed (ACHUN, FOFB. IR, Europa-II, Holanda, 19). Concerned with the ideological leanings of Fals-Borda’s ‘science of the people’, some individual scholars chose to incorporate action research within a broader range of methodologies (see [Molano, 1978](#), p. x-xii); while others argued that the centrality of the intellectual vanguard had to be underpinned by the principles of neo-Marxism (see [Tandon & Hall, 2014](#), p. 7). In the end, the symposium failed to issue a joint declaration embracing a radical approach to action research. Still, Fals-Borda’s first exposure to ‘participatory research’ occurred during the same symposium, when — as will be discussed later — Budd Hall, two researchers from Swantz’s (2016, p. 44) Jipemoyo project in Tanzanian and others shared findings from a range of ongoing participatory endeavours across Asia, Africa and North America. This is subtly evidenced in a footnote discussing the role of dialogue in redressing researcher-participant asymmetries, wherein [Fals-Borda \(1979, p. 50\)](#) refers to Hall’s PR as “emergent and pertinent” international work which may provide “relevant material for reflection,” suggesting that the researcher may be more politically effective by assuming an “attitude of apprentice” and allowing him/herself to be “expropriated” of knowledge and techniques.

International networking and participation by the people

The international context underpinning Fals-Borda’s *participatory turn* is highly relevant, as it coincides with a time when academic discussions on participatory research were almost non-existent in Colombia. His collaboration with Budd Hall, whose seminal ideas on participatory research were inextricably linked to his engagement with adult education, and who established an international network of participatory researchers, proved essential for Fals-Borda’s ongoing epistemological reflections. Fals-Borda’s convergence in particular with Anisur Rahman’s thinking on the role of the revolutionary intellectual in empowering popular struggles certainly became evident. This section delves into these exchanges.

Learnings from Tanzania and the international participatory research network

While working as a researcher in Tanzania, Budd Hall became intimately familiar with the principle of Education for Self-Reliance, upon which then-President Nyerere built his administration’s (highly successful) adult education programme. Hall also met Paulo Freire in Tanzania, whose speech at the Institute of Adult Education outlined the globally renowned scholar’s view of research as an engaged practice ([Hall, 2005](#)). Consistent with the principles of self-reliance and Freire’s thematic research, [Hall \(1975, 1977\)](#) developed his own view of participatory research as an approach wherein the researcher’s political

responsibility consists of involving the expected beneficiaries in the process, and thereby enabling the process itself to bring about empowerment.

Marja-Liisa Swantz, then leading a project with rural women at the Bureau for Resource and Land Use Productivity in Tanzania, was highly influential too. Swantz had developed alone what she called participant research approach (Swantz, 2016, p. 53; Tandon & Hall, 2014, p. 5). Her groundbreaking work with women and villagers in Tanzania brought administrators and struggling groups into dialogue within the then present political structures, contributing to real solutions, reconciliation and awareness of the potential of PR as an effective tool for local development (Nyemba & Mayer, 2018). In contrast to the radical tendency founded by Freire and Fals-Borda in Latin America, in Tanzania, as Swantz (2016, p. 15) recalls it, the participatory paradigm became “a constructive path in the process of nation building” fostered by President Nyerere.

Building on these ideas and exchanges, Hall later pioneered the idea of an international network of participatory researchers. He laid out his plan in a special issue of the journal *Convergence* (1975), the first academic publication dedicated to PR, and subsequently during his participation in the First World Assembly of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in Tanzania. The latter proved especially influential as, following his intervention, the ICAE Board advised the Secretariat to give “highest possible priority” to implementing a participatory research program (ACHUN, FOFB. IAP, Canada, 5). To this end, Hall set up an advisory group in Canada, which found the developments of action-oriented research in Latin America and elsewhere not only inspiring but also propitious to establish an enduring dialogical partnership, contributed to designing an international network. This, they wrote, would serve as a forum for dialogue and exchange, build a network of people, experiences and literature, and ultimately support adult education across Africa, Asia and Latin America (Ibid, 5–7).

Budd Hall and Fals-Borda first came into contact when the former learnt of the latter’s intention to host a global conference on action research – the 1977 Cartagena Symposium (Hall, 2005, p. 7). In advance of the conference, Hall shared a project draft, *The Development of Participatory Research for Rural Development: A State-of-the-Art Review*, with Fals-Borda. This project, Hall wrote, would identify and systematise “effective, practical and scientifically sound methods of social investigation based on the participation of peasants and other rural workers in the investigation of matters which directly affect their lives” (ACHUN, FOFB, IR, E-N, Canada, 54; emphasis in original). Hall went on to present at the Cartagena Symposium, an experience he later recalled as among the most striking of his life; not only because of the atmosphere of collaboration, but the sense of “reaching at something new” at a time when participatory research was widely dismissed as little more than community development. “When we first started working on PR,” Hall (2020) recalls, “the idea was to validate the knowledge-creating capacity of people and provide tools that would legitimate [this], not simply to conceptualise a process for the co-construction of knowledge.”

At this stage, participatory research was mostly framed as a broad term encompassing Latin American action research and numerous other approaches which, taken together, represented a rejection of the alienating nature of traditional social research in favour of a more egalitarian model (ACHUN, FOFB, IR, E-N, Canada, 58). As such, Hall and other

members of the burgeoning international network first sought to deal with practical issues pertaining to rural realities, including a lack of mechanisms of cooperation, knowledge-exchange and systematisation of practical experiences, as well as the limited research capacity in the Global South where effective participatory research was most urgent (ACHUN, FOFB. IAP, Canada, 5–7).

Despite the absence of a sturdy conceptual framework, the pioneering work of the participatory network rested on clear ontological principles. Hall's (1977) concerns sprang from the question "Who has the right to create knowledge?"— a right which administrators, policy-makers and social scientists had monopolised across the Global South. For Hall and others, this monopoly misrepresented, overlooked and oversimplified the complex lived realities of marginalized groups, failing to recognise that "[People] can only develop themselves" (President Neyrere, in Hall, 1977, p. 1). In this sense, the goal of the network was not to conceptualise a process for the joint production of knowledge, but to validate the knowledge-creating capacity of civil society and other actors outside academia and, with this, build local capacity for collective action. In sum, Hall's work reformulated Fals-Borda's early assessment of how to build a more politically effective 'science of the people', such that achieving transformative change did not centre on grassroots organisations' embrace of science, but with the clear prioritisation of people's participation in the research process so that they would generate (and use) that knowledge within the participatory process.

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and Anisur Rahman's participatory research in India

Capitalising on the success of the 1977 Cartagena Symposium, Fals-Borda submitted a proposal to UNESCO for a cross-country analysis of action research. The project would clarify the method through a comparative assessment of concrete experiences across Peru, Australia, Africa, India, the islands of Fiji, Papua and New Hebrides and Colombia (ACHUN, FOFB. CI, India, 1977, 2). The challenge for Fals-Borda, as he wrote to José Manuel Mejía, leader of the Peru project, would be to produce an overarching theoretical framework and methodological guidance that could be locally applied so that the intended project outputs would be "practical, as expected of AR methodology," including booklets, leaflets, workshops and guidelines for training, among others (ACHUN, FOFB. RI, Perú, 43).

During a visit to UNESCO in September 1978 to discuss the proposal, Fals-Borda learnt of changing research priorities in UNESCO, which made its approval unlikely (ACHUN, FOFB. CI, India, 1978, 4). However, his trip to Europe proved fruitful: drawing on the proceedings of the Cartagena Symposium, Andrew Pearse, co-director of UNRISD's Programme on Popular Participation with whom Fals-Borda had prior extensive contact, was working on a review of 'consultative', 'action' and 'participatory' research (see Pearse & Stifel, 1979). Looking to gain a wider understanding, Pearse was to attend the first meeting of the Latin American node of the ICAE Participatory Research network in Venezuela (discussed further in next section), while his co-director Matthias Stiefel attended Fals-Borda's session on Action Research at the 1978 International

Sociological Association (ISA) Conference in Uppsala. As Pearce wrote, they were both very impressed by the “selection of thought and experience” that Fals-Borda had brought together (ACHUN, FOFB. RI, Europa-II, Suiza, 226). Fals-Borda was also in contact with Solon Barraclough, Director of the Programme on Popular Participation at UNRISD, who shared the reports of two roundtables on participatory research — to which he had invited leading international scholars, among them, Freire, Galtung, Lehman and Rahman — before reiterating his own interest in collaboration.

These roundtable reports reveal undeniable political-ideological convergences between Fals-Borda’s and other attendees’ espoused rationales with respect to participation in research. Specifically, roundtable discussants invoked “the pathology of non-participation,” a term capturing how dominant development ideas (e.g. ‘trickle-down’ theory) had long provided a justification for excluding local people from economic interventions. Moreover, in grappling with broader contextual and/or structural obstacles to participation and a more self-reliant mode of development, roundtable attendees affirmed the urgent need for the collation of existing knowledges, experiences and pedagogies (ACHUN, FOFB. RI, Europa-II, Suiza, 247–253). This discursive shift represented a conceptual evolution from participation *for* the people, which had been instrumental to 1960s development projects, to a participation *by* the people; that is, advocating for “right[s], recognition and more equitable distribution of resources” (Cornwall, 2000, p. 21).

While receptive to UNRISD’s participatory approach, Fals-Borda had long been critical of standard development models and increasingly suspicious of buzzwords like ‘participatory development’ or ‘popular participation,’ as indicated in his 1970 UNRISD report on cooperatives. Still, Fals-Borda’s time engaging with the UN and other international bodies proved intellectually consequential. During the aforementioned UNRISD roundtables, Anisur Rahman, Senior Researcher Officer at the International Labour Organisation (ILO), outlined his ongoing research on social and political struggles in India like the *Bhoomi Sena* (Land Army) of Maharashtra. Rahman (1978) was openly critical of the vanguardist trend within radical thinking for assuming a more “advanced consciousness” than the masses. Intrigued, Fals-Borda wrote to Rahman expressing his “deep appreciation” of the latter’s approach and cited notable synergies in their thinking. He further enclosed a copy of his 1977 Cartagena symposium paper, specifically drawing Rahman’s attention to his concern with the problem of praxis which, he hoped, would be “of interest for comparative reasons” (ACH-UN, FOFB. CI, Suiza, 1979, 3).

Rahman’s response was enthusiastic: “I read your paper almost in one breath,” he said, “the description you give of the interaction between action researchers and the masses in Colombia fits ... closely to ours with *Bhoomi Sena*, ... which evolved more or less on its own without a very conscious design to start with” (Ibid, 06). Rahman then suggested possible avenues for publication of Fals-Borda’s work across South Asia — a region where his reflections were highly pertinent given the attention action research was receiving — before enclosing a paper where he reflects on the 1978 convention of the Kerala People’s Science Movement, a movement that understood scientific approach to social action as being essential for improving the conditions of the poor and hence, rejected “revolutionary intellectuals” who conceived their role as that of simply

transferring knowledge to people (1978, p. 407). In his next letter, Fals-Borda discussed additional convergences and expressed his hope for ongoing dialogue and the creation of “a movement for action research world-wide” (ACH-UN, FOFB. CI, Suiza, 1979, 6). This led to a decade of collaborative work, during which both scholar-activists produced more mature reflections on PAR (Fals-Borda & Rhaman, 1991).

One more aspect of this initial epistolary exchange deserves attention. Rahman’s reaction to Fals-Borda’s work touched on a crucial obstacle to authentic participation in action-oriented research, namely a lack of autonomy among grassroots organisations to develop and assert knowledge, and an elite monopoly over the bounds of scientific knowledge. Without the possibility “to seize this social power...[from] the specialised scientists,” Rahman stated, “the struggle against forms of socio-economic oppression cannot be liberating” (ACH-UN, FOFB. CI, Suiza, 1979, 6). These interconnected issues constituted the basis of Rahman’s (1983) critical analysis of Fals-Borda’s work, instrumental to the ongoing development of PAR.

New reflections on people science: Towards participation with the people

Fals-Borda (1991, p. 25) described the period after conducting intense militant research as a time when his “early activism and radicalism” gave way to “reflection,” though without losing his “impulse in the field”. However, the analysis of this intellectual and personal context within which Fals-Borda finally articulated his action research within the participatory paradigm has been neglected so far. This comprises his active involvement in the ICAE Participatory Research Network and at the 1980 Ljubljana forum which represented a celebration of all forms of collective analysis wherein people retain the ownership of knowledge, and a series of reflexive conversations culminating in the first use of the term PAR. This section outlines how these exchanges allowed him to draw on wider contributions and more deeply incorporate participation into his framework.

The Latin American network and the 1980 Ljubljana Forum

While the first meeting of the Latin American node of the ICAE Participatory Research Network (held in Caracas in 1978) counted on attendance across Africa, Asia, Europe and North America, Fals-Borda only sporadically attended this and other events that year due to his ongoing campaign to liberate his wife, María Cristina, who had been arrested and detained on suspicion of affiliation with the M-19 guerrilla movement. However, his communication with Vío Grossi, a Chilean scholar and node coordinator then exiled in Venezuela, became fluid, frequent and amicable. Their correspondence centred mostly on core developments in the network to which, it was widely acknowledged, Fals-Borda continued to offer both visibility and intellectual rigour, remaining a crucial reference for praxis and epistemological issues. Accordingly, Vío Grossi invited Fals-Borda to present a paper on the epistemological aspects of action research in an international seminar on participatory research (ACHUN, FOFB, IR, Venezuela, IM, 1977–1990, 34). Fals-Borda’s reply to Vío Grossi is highly interesting as he welcomed the invitation on the

basis that PR, as he wrote, “[was] a very timely topic, to which [he was] paying some attention” (Ibid, 33; emphasis added). This again suggests that Fals-Borda regarded his AR as separate from the participatory paradigm. As it transpired, this paper was “Science and the Common People,” which [Vio Grossi et al. \(1980, p. 16\)](#) described as a comprehensive analysis of the epistemological issues at stake in PR. In contrast, Fals-Borda’s methodological musings were less well known given their availability only in Spanish and specificity to ‘the Colombian situation’ (Letter to Rahman. ACH-UN. FOFB. CI, Suiza, 1979, 5).

Fals-Borda later attended the first International Participatory Research Forum in Ljubljana, 1980, along with his wife who had been recently released from prison. There was a sense of collective joy: “Our network worked tirelessly to get María Cristina out of prison,” [Hall \(2020\)](#) recalled. Crucially, this was also the first time that the entire international network had gathered, thus offering a chance to “take stock” (Ibid.), resume the debates began at the Cartagena Symposium and advance “a little further than ... 3 years ago” ([de Vries, 1980, p. 81](#)). Fals-Borda was invited to speak on the epistemology of action research drawing on his “Science and the Common People,” which provides insight into his repositioning of action research within an overarching participatory framework ([Fals-Borda, 1981](#)).

The Ljubljana forum marked a definitive step towards clarifying Fals-Borda’s thinking on tackling the academic monopoly over scientific knowledge which, he argued, demanded a redefinition of people as the original source for development and creation of knowledge rather than mere subjects of research. This consensus stemmed from a wider acknowledgement that participatory research was not an “alternative to historical materialism,” nor should historical materialism “determine its dynamic” ([Vio Grossi, 1980, p. 73](#)). As [Jackson et al. \(1980, p. 42\)](#) stated, if both investigation and participation begin from the people’s viewpoint, there was simply no guarantee that popular struggles would take the form of a class struggle, nor adopt historical materialism as a framework. Aware of the dangers of the instrumentalization of the masses’ participation in revolutionary models, and equally, that political-ideological orthodoxy could hinder widespread participation, Fals-Borda (and other contributors) firmly contested the assumption that historical materialism - or any other specific philosophical or epistemological position - provides the necessary underpinning for participatory research.

As Ljubljana discussions revolved around the idea that the people involved in participatory research were “involved in their own development” (ICAE, 1980; introduction), Fals-Borda was able to reaffirm and refine his view of the central task of the professional researcher in supporting that aim. The clear weight he gave to building people’s capacity to explore their worlds and incorporate the resultant knowledge into their struggles aligned closely with De Vries’ (1980, p. 85–6) call for a “supportive and instrumental science,” which transforms reality through contributing to new knowledge, making existing knowledge more accessible and providing relevant knowledge-building and organisational skills to communities. But Fals-Borda took this further: critiquing his own former attempts at a ‘science of the proletariat’, he argued that supportive science must not merely be owned by the people, but facilitate the action-reflection cycle: that is, creating and sustaining the conditions for collective analysis and action through

harnessing the creativity and wisdom of marginalized peoples into educational processes — which he termed ‘University in the Diaspora’ (2010 [1980], p. 199).

Lastly, Ljubljana provided the opportunity to present a more systematised toolkit of collective analysis and dissemination techniques. In earlier work, [Fals-Borda and Libreros \(1974\)](#) elaborated on people’s participation in research through community-based workshops, seminars, visual representations, film, theatre, puppet shows, community radio, graphic stories and cultural celebrations as potential outputs among others. While Fals-Borda did not present this list during the 1977 Cartagena Symposium, in Ljubljana he spoke in precise terms about how “dialogical and participant strategies” (Fals-Borda, 2010 [1980], p. 191) had shaped his methodological approach, which in turn opened up a multiplicity of choices of media and cultural production. Consequently, at Ljubljana, Fals-Borda redefined his method as a “radical and participative” form of AR (Ibid).

When participatory action research became participatory action research: Equalising participation and action

After the Ljubljana conference, Fals-Borda became involved in a series of seminars established by the Latin American ICAE network to allow for continued grassroots knowledge exchange, hosted in Venezuela (ACHUN, FOFB. IR, Venezuela, IM, 1977–1990, 117–129), while working on a proposal for comparative analysis of action research in Latin America, as requested by the ILO. The ILO project, titled *A Study of Countervailing Power in Latin America: The Role of Knowledge and Communication*, reveals significant differences from the earlier UNESCO project. While the first project took predetermined view of outputs and restricted scientific handling to professional researchers, the ILO project foregrounded reflexivity and critical thinking over practical outcomes, calling for people’s ‘real’ participation across all stages of research. While the UNESCO project centred on systematising and validating the core principles of action research for radical change, as conceived in Cartagena, the ILO project specifically sought to harness the transformative potential of participation through people’s education, collective analysis and action. Additionally, while the UNESCO project sought to define an epistemological framework for action research, the new proposal focused on dismantling the ‘classical subject-object binomial’ through the articulation of varied socio-political liberating currents, within a ‘paradigm of action and participatory research’ (ACHUN, FOFB. RI, Europa-II, OIT, 52–54) — an exchange that culminated in the book *Knowledge and People’s Power: Lessons with Peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia*, 1985.

Fals-Borda first used the precise combination of words, “Action (Participatory) Research,” in January 1981, while teaching a 3-week seminar “Opportunities and Limits of Action Research” at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Austria (ACH-UN, FOFB. IR, Austria, 3–4). Despite the parenthesis, the centrality of participation is apparent in Fals-Borda’s lectures on his method alongside science and praxis. That year, after being invited to present a paper to the Nicaraguan Association of Social Scientists — later published as “PAR and Workers” (1983) — Fals-Borda finally coined the name Participatory Action

Research (Hall, 2005: 8), giving equal weight to the three words of the acronym ‘PAR’ (Rahman, 2008).

Fals-Borda (1983: 14) recalls that Anisur Rahman had first suggested he abandon the term action research altogether, which had led to confusions with other methods like Sol Tax’s action research in the US and downplayed the centrality of participation. Ultimately, however Fals-Borda (and Rahman) agreed that the goal was to realize a participatory form of action research and/or participatory research geared towards transformative action. As Rahman (2008, p. 439) recalled shortly after Fals-Borda’s passing, this precise phrasing emphasised that ‘when oppressed people participate in research as full subjects they don’t do so to write a book – they do so to promote their own struggling lives through collectively self-deliberated action’.

Closing remarks

This paper has explored a peculiar puzzle in the intellectual trajectory of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda: why after years of scepticism about the term participation, it became central to his method of Participatory Action Research (PAR). In tracing key publications, events, correspondence and discussions, I find that the sociologist’s *participatory turn* encapsulates a process of intense critical reflexivity, building on his role as a social scientist and catalyst for social change, and deeply enriched by his wider engagement with international networks.

I began by critiquing common ideas pertaining to the origins of PAR as it relates to the tendency of action research — or participation *by* the people— which developed associated to popular struggles in Colombia and beyond. It showed that Fals-Borda was deeply disillusioned with the political and academic mainstream, as encapsulated in his writings on subversion, participation-insertion, radical change and, finally, his re-elaboration of a science of the people after the 1977 Cartagena Symposium. The ultimate significance of this work lay not in its originality, but in the frank self-critique of his praxis, and the related conclusion that transforming reality depended less on theoretical clarity than facilitating people’s collective capacity to understand and act upon that reality — a process incompatible with the imposition of exogenous theoretical or ideological standpoints. In this sense, for all the ‘tragic pitfalls’ of action research (Rahman, 1983, p. 8) – wherein participation was largely realized *for* or *by* (as opposed to *with*) the people – crucial ideas and techniques were tested and developed during this period that later became integral to PAR.

Fals-Borda’s work, “Science and the Common People,” presented at Ljubljana, served to bridge the epistemological gap between earlier formulations of action research and his more mature ideas of PAR in the 1980s. Subsequent attempts to incorporate the participatory paradigm within his action research theory and praxis became clear within his adoption of varied names (Participatory/Action Research, Action (Participatory) Research and Participatory-Action-Research, among others). These assertions would later form the basis of Fals-Borda’s (1990, p. 81) ‘ontology of participation’, that is, research predicated on a horizontal subject-subject relationship that spurs emancipatory transformation from the margins, contests asymmetric micro-level power relations and breaks

the dominant institutional monopoly over knowledge production. The breaking of hegemonic relations was also reflected in the establishment of a dialogical network of scholars and community-based researchers committed to participatory research worldwide — something that Fals-Borda (1970) advocated for in his response to Silvert's (1970) essay. As he wrote, cooperation between the global South and the global North required much more than unilateral technical assistance; it needed 'honest partnership.'

The article further revealed that the intricate process culminating in Fals-Borda's *participatory turn* was distinctly interdisciplinary, involving intimate connection between social sciences and adult and popular education (Hall, 1975; Swantz, 1975). It was here where PAR acquired not only greater recognition internationally, but took on its character as a process developed *with* and led *by the* people: if the only innovative drive to be harnessed had been the researcher's, the participatory paradigm would have had little meaning (Rappaport, 2020, p. 20). The equal emphasis which he ultimately gave to 'action,' and 'participation,' captures how people progressively and self-consciously transform their environment, in which the research plays a catalytic and supportive role (see also Fals-Borda, 1987, 2013).

During the last two decades, there has been an extraordinary development of techniques and digital tools to facilitate people's participation in research, which proved to be extremely useful during the Covid pandemic. My work in the research project [project] (see acknowledgements), extensively benefited from these innovations. However, I remain certain that for all the contributions of innovative methodological strategies, the ontology of participation in PAR is what fundamentally differentiates this method from other instrumental or top-down forms of people's participation.

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Notes

1. Drawing almost exclusively on Fals-Borda's *Ciencia Propia y Colonialismo Intelectual* 1970, a book written even before his engagement with action research, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018: 331) argues: 'Fals Borda distinguishes between participant-observation, observation-intervention, and observation-insertion, the last one corresponding to PAR.' This narrow understanding of PAR is a paradoxical aspect of an author deeply concerned with cognitive justice in the Global South.
2. Rappaport's (2020) analysis of Fals-Borda's work with the rank and file of the peasant movement has demonstrated how he and his associates successfully transformed research techniques into participatory experiences, albeit "in ways that are not always readily observable in retrospect" (p.19; see also Robles & Rappaport, 2018).
3. While in Spanish the synergy of action and research can be found as 'action-research' (investigación-acción), the hyphen is avoided here as it changes the meaning and becomes research defined by action.
4. Fals-Borda's refusal to establish his own political movement, or to side with either the official line or the radical left of the movement, forced him to abandon temporarily his activities with the peasant movement (Parra, 1983), after which La Rosca was transformed into Fundarco, 'an organisation primarily concerned with research' (Rappaport, 2017: 233).

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