

LIVING FREIRE IN PANDEMIC...PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND DEMOCRATIZING KNOWLEDGE AT KNOWLEDGEDEMOCRACY.ORG

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We are living in wild times. And we can learn so much from our brothers and sisters around the world who have learned over many generations to improvise, to work collectively, to build and manifest together as *raison d'être*. The kinds of work we both do around the word—participatory community development—is now alive and well in every crevice of earth thanks to the pandemic. And this is in many ways good news. We have many models to help see us through, to help us be creatively focused on our own emancipation from our current tyranny—both political and pandemic.

Old divisions between “healthy and unhealthy” and the so-called “first and third world” are dissolving before our eyes even as we see the infrastructure of the United States begin to crumble and as we see that our standing and respect in the world is less secure than our collective denial and arrogance may have suggested. Let us look back for a moment to look forward: The end of formal colonialism ushered in the era of development, where Cold War anxieties propelled the Western world to engage in ongoing infrastructural development projects in what was then deemed the “third world”. Decades later, globalizing circulations of people, capital, and knowledge have diminished the distance between an imagined “third world” and the so-called “first world”. Yet, severe inequalities persist, and indeed, continue to increase across the globe. New visibility given to uneven development through social media and public critiques of top-down development efforts have, in some contexts, forced “experts” working in “developing countries” to rethink our own positions in the conceptualization and actualization of development research, programs, and strategies. In most contexts, however, impositional, hegemonic, and deficit-oriented models of and approaches to development remain the norm. Top down everything is where development was, is, and unless we stop it, where it will pick right up after this pandemic. Yet, the chaos of the pandemic, with nearly all our life routines disrupted and with the definition of the status quo shifting at every turn, leaves us with lots of empty space. The unknowns call out for definition. Cracks in hegemonic infrastructures have been revealed and the use of the internet has helped open up democratic dialogues that have potential for establishing new solidarities both within and across cultures (Call-Cummings, M., Hauber-Özer, M., Rowell, L., & Ross, K., in press; Rowell & Call-Cummings, 2020). Overall, the topsy turvy times we now live in have created spaces in which change can emerge. There is, as Glaude (2020) puts it, an opportunity to “begin again.” What will we fill that space with? Fals Borda (1998) asserted that participatory action research (PAR) in Latin America and other parts of the Global South offered a way to correct the “unequal relations of knowledge” through “stimulating popular knowledges” (p. 31). Whether coming from South America (Fals Borda, 1979), Africa (Hall, 1992; Swantz, 1996), or India (Tandon, 1982), consistent calls for breaking the knowledge monopoly of the Global North were strongly connected with recognition of the value of participatory forms of action research in the Global South.

Among PAR pioneers, knowledge democracy was an effort to break the hold of “intellectual colonialism” (Fals Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003, p. 35) rooted in the monopolizing effects of the dominant and dominating research paradigm of positivism (Tandon, 1982). According to Hall (1992), mobilizing disenfranchised and oppressed peoples required demystifying the social science approach to knowledge production and hierarchization: “We have created an illusion and we have come to believe in it—namely, that only those with sophisticated techniques can create knowledge” (p. 25). Similarly, Fals Borda and Rahman (1991) describe support for “knowledge existing as local or indigenous science and wisdom to be advanced by the people’s self-inquiry” (p. 31) as a basis for achieving equality and democracy. Many scholars and activists in the Northern Hemisphere saw parallels between what critics such as Fals Borda (1979) and Tandon (1982) were describing in the global South and their own struggles for social justice. Gaventa (1991) outlined three strategies for North American PAR: (1) the reappropriation of knowledge; (2) developing the people’s knowledge; and (3) popular participation in the social production of knowledge (p. 122). He discussed these strategies in the context of grassroots groups gaining control over “knowledge and skills normally considered to be the monopoly of the experts” (p. 124). The similarity between “Third World” and “First World” participatory research initiatives was rooted in the recognition that groups in both worlds shared “characteristics of domination by the knowledge system” (Gaventa, 1991, p. 122).

The knowledge democracy initiative



Knowledge democratization has been a component of the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) since the network’s founding in 2012. ARNA initially included Knowledge Democracy as a part of its focus on Knowledge Mobilization. ARNA organizers were struck by the importance of trying to establish forms of ‘alternative knowledge mobilization’ that reached outside the box of traditional research report production and presentations before policy-making groups. Something was needed that spoke to supporting popular knowledges and that demonstrated convergences between grassroots knowledge production and the commitments of engaged activist-scholars working in university settings. None of this work is easy, of course, and initial progress was slow.

In 2016, a significant step was taken when ARNA chose to create a participatory social experiment to initiate direct involvement in knowledge democracy networking. As a part of the 5th Annual ARNA Conference then being planned for Cartagena, Colombia in June 2017, ARNA leaders also began to organize the 4th Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy (GAKD) as a one-day post-conference gathering. A global GAKD organizing committee was assembled in the winter of 2016. A formal global announcement of the event was posted on ARNA’s website in June 2016 and was shared via email listserv with action research networks, authors, and scholar-activists around the world. The global organizing committee was co-chaired by Lonnie Rowell, ARNA Knowledge Mobilization coordinator, and Christine Edwards-Groves, Australian coordinator and international co-leader of the Pedagogy, Education and Praxis network.

To help participants prepare for the assembly, a call also was sent out globally to regional networks of action researchers encouraging these networks to organize workshops in the months prior to the June 2017 assembly around the theme of reconciling epistemological, ideological and political differences in the interest of a sustainable and socially just world (Wood, McAteer, & Whitehead, 2019). This step was taken to honor the spirit and the process of the organizing for the 1997 *World Congress of Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, Space, and Time*, which had been held in Cartagena, Colombia. Global Assembly organizers wished to demonstrate continuity and solidarity with the trajectory of knowledge democratization established by the 1977 *First World Symposium on Participatory Action Research*, also held in Cartagena, and the World Congress held 20 years later. In light of Fals Borda's (1998) powerful compilation and analysis of what had been presented in Cartagena in 1997, the 2017 organizers began their work with a sense of preparing respectfully for another "solemn act of reaffirmation" (Fals Borda, 1998, xii) in line with the 1977 and 1997 gatherings. Preparatory workshops for the 1997 Congress were held in Colombia and 14 other countries (Fals Borda, 1998). For the 2017 Cartagena gathering, 12 participatory workshops were convened in ten countries, including Colombia, Denmark, Ireland, Mexico, Mongolia, South Africa, Spain, Uganda, United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition, two virtual international workshops were organized. Reports from all of these events were posted on the knowledgedemocracy.org website (Seeley, McAteer, Sánchez, & Kenfield, 2019).

The Global Assembly was held on June 16, 2017 at the Cartagena de Indias Convention Center in Cartagena, Colombia. The event was attended by over 300 people from throughout the Americas and around the world (Seeley, McAteer, Sánchez, & Kenfield, 2019). To date, two publications have examined the Assembly, with one presenting an analysis of what took place in one phase of organizing the event (Wood, McAteer, & Whitehead, 2019) and a second exploring participants' experiences of the day itself (Seeley et al., 2019). A third article by one of the Assembly planners provides an important overview of critical questions involving participatory action research and the challenges of knowledge democracy (Stern, 2019). A fourth article (Hong & Rowell, 2019), inspired by ARNA's orientation towards knowledge mobilization and knowledge democracy, discussed building knowledge democracies in education in the U.S. All four articles were included in a two-part Special Issue on Knowledge Democracy published by the international journal, *Educational Action Research*.



Since the event, ARNA leadership has continued to reflect on the experience of the 1st Assembly, to discuss next steps, and to organize social experiments in knowledge democratization. In the spring of 2019, ARNA embarked on a strategic planning process for 2020-2025, with approval of a set of four Strategic Priorities coming in September. Strategic Priority #1 calls for developing a Knowledge Democracy Initiative that incorporates knowledge mobilization of works based on action research and participatory action research and explores democratized knowledge production and dissemination as a basis for inclusive and humanistic public discourse and public policy. The knowledgedemocracy.org website, which was originally created as a part of the organizing of the Global Assembly, is now the platform for the ARNA Knowledge Democracy Initiative.

Philosophic Considerations

Action research itself is extremely diverse, both thematically and methodologically. Its networks and communities are engaged in committed work building social solidarities, emancipatory and adult education, valuing diverse experiences through participatory knowledge approaches, empowerment in policy / advocacy, transforming gender power, making new knowledges, and grassroots transformations visible, networking for change, and forging post-colonial / post-neoliberal development pathways, to name just a few themes! It might be said that the boundaries for action research are fuzzy rather than hard.

The global assembly on knowledge democracy provided an opportunity to open to a different fuzzy boundary. This did not challenge the delineations people have made within action research and participatory research communities: it did not challenge the identity of action research.. It was an invitation to see AR approaches within a new context, the one outlined by Santos and others in the knowledge democracy space. That is to say that the AR community is not the only one working on knowledge democracy; there are others, including the World Social Forum, the Peer to Peer movement, and the Commons movement, to name a few.

Action researchers at the global assembly were not asked to 'let go' of their identity within the global action research community, but simply to play in a different space that is part of a different context of social and global transformation. There could be, over time, rich connections between the AR communities and others in the knowledge democracy space that will enrich many sides in the work of transforming knowledge-power. These connections reflect what Orlando Fals Borda (1998) addressed as "participatory convergence" at the 1997 World Conference for Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, Space and Time.

Jose Ramos, one of the 2017 global assembly organizers, views the immense challenges of the present as a call for fostering "a whole-scale social reorientation, whereby taking response-ability for our futures at personal, organizational, and planetary scales becomes commonplace" (2017, p. 839). The scale and scope of the needed reorientation goes far beyond narrow bands of expertise. Action research at all levels and in all countries and cultures has a role in nurturing and sustaining the integration of knowledge democracy with the production and dissemination of knowledge (Hong & Rowell, 2019). For Ramos, Knowledge Democracy is to be built on a proliferation of epistemologically diverse inquiries into possible futures in a process "that leads to actions/experiments that drive further learning and knowledge" (p. 828). From the perspective of the present moment, the post-pandemic world may foster massive social change initiatives and bold social experiments, with continuous learning to hold initiator-activists accountable and to guide ongoing strengthening of actions, experiments, and new policies by means of the data and analysis from the

cyclical processes of action research and participatory action research.

A little more than two months before he passed away, Paulo Friere wrote a letter to the organizers of the 1997 Cartagena gathering. He had been invited to speak and was writing to inform the organizers that his ill health would not allow for travel to the Cartagena Congress. In a poignant concluding passage in his letter, Freire asserted that “above all we must fight against the power of the dominant neoliberal ideology that keeps on offending and attacking the human nature while reproducing itself socially and historically, threatening dreams, utopias, and hopes” (cited in Fals Borda, 1998, xvii). Freire’s legacy for establishing alternative means of social reproduction built on utilizing education to uplift those in the margins of society through respecting their hopes and dreams is well established. His ideas are repeatedly referenced in the literature of action research. For example, his ideas are referenced throughout chapters of the *Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research* (2017). Ledwith (2017) discusses Freire’s concepts of *denunciation* and *annunciation* as an essential element in both critiquing the status quo while also opening space to transform the present into a better future (p. 51). For Ledwith, Freire’s ideas provided crucial insights into the power of knowledge and its production and control that led her to adopt participatory action research as “a liberating praxis” in line with what she sees as the true values of community development. Thiollent and Colette (2017) assert that Freire’s work in Latin America was crucial to the spread of participatory research in “the field of popular education, in awareness-building initiatives and liberation pedagogy” (p. 161) among other contexts.

Practical Considerations

From a practical point of view, the pandemic poses challenges and opportunities for the work of knowledge democracy. We outline some of the practical considerations that have guided ARNA’s knowledge democracy efforts in these crazy times in the hope that they might generate further dialogue and contribute to the launch of new initiatives.

- Building social solidarities in a time of social distancing and isolation. ARNA’s Knowledge Democracy Initiative team launched a small-scale photovoice project in March 2020. The aim of the project was to provide “a virtual, participatory photovoice approach to gathering photographic and text-based insights from around the world of how people are experiencing and seeing solidarity every day” (<https://knowledgedemocracy.org/projects-and-events/arna-social-solidarity-project/>). The project is further discussed by Rowell (2020).
- A space is being prepared for knowledgedemocracy.org through which ongoing dialogues will take place in a virtual circle of critique and the sharing of creative solutions to the global epistemic crisis (Ramos, 2020) and the links between this crisis and the pandemic. A first step was taken on August 11, with the convening of an ARNA webinar on “Knowledge Democratization in a Global Crisis.” This two-hour event saw 21 participants from six countries gathered to share thoughts on the role of action research in knowledge democratization and vice versa *in this historical moment* (COVID-19 and focus on racial justice), how university students and faculty, scholar-activists, and engaged citizens can work together *in this moment* to overcome knowledge monopolies blocking community-generated creative solutions to social problems, and concrete steps ARNA and the Knowledge Democracy Initiative might take to realize a vision of knowledge democratization *in this moment* and beyond? Planning is now underway for additional dialogues. All of the material associated with these dialogues will be linked with the new virtual community center to be established on knowledgedemocracy.org
- The work plan for the coming months also includes seeking partners for organizing A future project involving community-based and school-based social experiments in strengthening civic literacy and competency. The experiments may involve both web-based and in-person interactions building on the work of Arthur Lupia (see <https://www.arthurlupia.com/civic-competence>) and others. The efforts here will examine thinking and acting beyond the present “Disimagination Machine” (Giroux, 2014) of American civic life and rebuilding social capacity for imagining a better, more equitable and socially just future. Initiatives are needed that address restoring and nurturing progressive social imagination among youth and adults. How can youth and adults be encouraged to fully embrace the historical memory associated with the long-standing traumas of racism and the “big lie” (Glaude, 2020) of American history while being in a sense inoculated against the virus of disbelief, cynicism and hatred? Such a project can be built on the recognition that efforts are needed to practice knowledge democratization in the context of small group relations and social innovation and experimentation rooted in the creation of dialogic spaces, both actual and virtual.

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