

# Education, PAR and Social Change: International Perspectives

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Originating as more a form of anti-colonial praxis than research methodology in the global South from the 1960s, PAR has increasingly been adopted by institutions and agencies within the advanced capitalist countries of the north. In particular, versions of PAR have been discovered and adopted by international agencies, such as the World Bank, and deployed for the purposes of development in the Global South. Consequently, as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century we now confront a situation where an organic, radically informed anti-colonial praxis, has not only been appropriated and turned back on the subaltern and marginalized populations that inspired it through resistance to colonial rule, but is progressively being used as a technology of power in advanced capitalist societies. Thus, the neutering of the political intent and definition of PAR (in academic and in governing institutions as exemplified by the more professionalized and technicized forms of PAR in service of the reproduction of ruling relations) processes committed to the interests of a popular pedagogical and knowledge project of, from, by and for the marginalized and dispossessed social groups, calls attention to the pressing political and epistemic necessity to redraw the lines distinguishing various PAR engagements. Drawing from indigenous, Global South and critical Euro-American traditions, this paper will introduce four major themes addressed in a recently published collection<sup>1</sup> on PAR in international contexts: (i) co-optation and assimilation, (ii) knowledge creation and the critique of mainstream social sciences, (iii) social movement learning and PAR; and (iv) PAR as an indigenous methodology. Drawing on arguments presented in the book, the paper argues for a return to PAR's anti and/or critical-colonial roots in living indigenous traditions, to Euro-American critical traditions and to "Third-Worldist" conceptions from which PAR germinated as a politics, a pedagogy and knowledge of, by, and for the people.

## II. CONTEMPORARY TRAJECTORIES IN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAR

The idea for our collection on *International Perspectives on Education, Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Social Change* (Kapoor and Jordan, 2009) was prompted by the critical observation that social and educational research, including its more participatory expressions, is being defined by the following trajectories in the contemporary era:

(a) an onto-epistemic Euro-American cultural modernization imperative with its attendant homogenizing and assimilationist cultural-educational-research implications (Grande, 2004, Nandy, 1987, Smith, 1999);

(b) a neoliberal market fundamentalism that corrals and instrumentalizes research towards selecting and addressing research issues that are primarily of significance to the market and to corporatized-states (or

conversely, research that is of little political threat to these interests) to assist in the management and control of populations (a sociology of regulation and discipline) (Baxi, 2000, Hamm, 2005, Levidow, 2005, Reimer, 2004) in service of global capital and modernization agendas, while continuing to proclaim the myths of democracy and sustainability;

(c) an increasing Euro-American professionalization (e.g. technicization and scientization of method) of the practice/approach to participatory forms of research (or approaches to an “acceptable PAR”) that submerges the ideological content of theories and knowledge claims and masquerades for a purported *objectivity* (while simultaneously denouncing the possibility of “objective truths and methods”) that is subsequently deemed funds-worthy (for examples of techno-managerial PAR designs, see selections from (Reason and Bradbury, 2006), while the object and purpose of research is curtailed to servicing the professions (Kemmis and Smith, 2008) (e.g., enhancements in teacher pedagogy, health practice, shop-floor training programs and “quality of work life” programs for productivity and effective service delivery) in the Lewinian tradition of action research, thereby effectively circumventing issues of power-political interests, the relations of ruling and how research contributes to the reproduction of socio-political asymmetries; and

(d) the co-optation of “participatory *anything*” (essentially processes of democratization) in to its anti-thesis, that is, processes of control and discipline, benign or exploitative, by international institutions allegedly addressing progressive concerns around Third World development, debt, impoverishment, and inequality (e.g., World Bank conceptions and applications) (Abrahamsen, 2000, Cooke and Kothari, 2001, Jordan, 2007, Rahnema, 1990) or by civil society groups (e.g., international NGOs) (Green, 2000) peddling empowerment, justice and human rights, while simultaneously working towards de-politicizing the politics of pain (tranquilizing protest with the rhetoric of the promise of participation) often engendered by market-state violence<sup>ii</sup>, largely left un-addressed by the voluntary champions of the people or alternatively, activated as fodder for self-perpetuation and continued aid-dependent relationships.

Given these dominant trajectories, it should be of no surprise that PAR, as with other critically-reflexive research approaches (e.g. communitarian forms explored by feminist and anti-globalisation movements), has been subject to processes of dismemberment and disengagement in professional and academic spaces, while also being hollowed out of its radical impetus and re-contextualised within relations of ruling that are inherently antithetical to its founding principles (e.g. as in participatory management). Indeed, in many respects PAR has been subject to what C Wright Mills (1959) referred to as ‘historical drift,’ i.e. a new hegemonic order that has witnessed the rise and entrenchment of neoliberal forms of governmentality over the past three decades. Initially pioneered by the Reagan/Thatcher administrations in the UK and US of the 1980s, it has now come to characterise and define the global capitalist system (or globalisation) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Harvey, 2005). While neo-liberalism can be viewed as a primarily economic philosophy in which free markets are the centre-piece (Friedman and Friedman, 1985, Hayek, 1976), implicit within it is also a system of governmentality whose locus is the individual consumer; not the citizen of post-war social democracy (Johnson, 1991). As theorists such as Yeatman (1997, Yeatman, 1998), Rose (1992) and Levitas (1986) have shown, the transition from the politics of citizen rights to one where everyday life is organised through consumers and market relations, has fundamentally recontextualised the discourse of participatory democracy. By extension, our argument is that the prevalent discourses of participation that define contemporary approaches to PAR and participatory research have also increasingly been infiltrated by economic and social relations generated by neoliberalism and its associated forms of governmentality. It is within this emerging hegemonic order that PAR has increasingly come to be imbricated in the social relations of neo-liberal accumulation as a technology of power for management and the professions. Where it was an overtly political response organised around emancipation from colonial rule, it is now viewed by mainstream social scientists, managers and professionals as a methodology for improving productivity, efficiency, value-added and performativity.

This critical assessment of the contemporary trajectories of research - particularly versions of PAR - prompted the development of our edited book drawing primarily from indigenous, global South and Euro-

American critical traditions in educational and social research that attempt to: (a) demonstrate what PAR, education, and social change mean in varied international contexts (while foregrounding indigenous and Southern contexts), since research germinates from different culturally defined and politico-historically located onto-epistemic starting points and political projects; (b) emphasize the political nature and contribution of socio-educational research and the different ways in which PAR can and is contributing to various political projects of the *wretched of the earth* (Fanon and Philcox, 2004) internationally, while continuing to rely on a critical reflexivity (a defining ingredient of any PAR process committed to a politics of the margins and the constant re-invigoration of participatory research approaches) concerned with the moral, practical, and political ramifications and contradictions of PAR activations; (c) demonstrate and explore aspects of the critique of current approaches to research (including dominant conceptions of its more participatory variants) and the associated political interests that are served by such research; and (d) address these afore-mentioned possibilities while drawing upon participatory educational (formal, non-formal, informal, and incidental learning) and socio-cultural research in multiple spaces including formal education (e.g. higher education), community (e.g. in indigenous communities) and applications in and from social movements/struggles, primarily in the South.

By embracing indigenous conceptions, approaches and practices of PAR as a living praxis; by magnifying the role and contribution of PAR in the multifarious struggles of marginalized social groups in the regions of the global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America); and by engaging critical Euro-American conceptions of PAR and its utility in a politics attentive to addressing ecological concerns, commercialization of education/research and the containment of democratic pedagogies and popular research/knowledge processes in formal education, our aim in this paper is to return PAR to its anti and/or critical-colonial roots in living indigenous traditions (Smith, 1999), to Euro-American critical traditions and to Third Worldist conceptions (Fals-Borda and Anisur Rahman, 1991, Freire, 1972, Hall et al., 1982, Mustafa, 1981, Nyerere, 1979, Rahman, 1985) from which PAR germinated as a politics, a pedagogy and a knowledge of, by and for the people.

Drawing on arguments made in the book by contributing authors, and ourselves the paper attempts to address some of the following guiding questions/issues related to education, PAR, and social change in international and marginal contexts:

- i. What is PAR in contemporary international and marginal contexts? How is it being conceptualized in different education and social change locations and initiatives? What are some examples of these various PAR projects for social change?
- ii. Who are the protagonists of PAR work and in what communities of engagement? How does the practice of PAR in indigenous and Southern locations continue to make research and education/learning meaningful to the participating communities? What do indigenous and diasporic authors from the South have to say about PAR from their different locations of partnership?
- iii. From critical vantage points, what are some of the current preoccupations and issues concerning PAR and the politics of knowledge creation, education, and social change?

In addressing these questions, we have chosen to draw out and present what we view as the salient preoccupations and issues that are common to the authors who have made contributions to *Education, PAR and Social Change: International Perspectives*. In doing this, we hope to show that not only has PAR evolved and transformed considerably since its beginnings over fifty years ago, but that in the contemporary period it continues to be the most effective form of research for working with marginalized communities and populations across a wide range of social/geographical contexts, and on an equally wide array of pressing issues from street kids in Brazil, rural women in Tanzania, indigenous populations in Algeria, Canada, India, and New Zealand, to communities affected by multinational mining operations in Ghana. As we outlined in the introduction to this paper, these preoccupations and issues identified by authors fall into the following categories, each of which we discuss below: co-optation and assimilation;

knowledge creation and the critique of mainstream social sciences; social movement learning and PAR; and PAR as an indigenous methodology.

### III. CO-OPTION AND ASSIMILATION

The argument presented here is that since its inception almost half a century ago within anti-colonial movements in the global south, PAR increasingly has been subject to forces that have compromised its revolutionary potential as a transformatory methodology for subaltern and otherwise marginalized populations aimed at bettering their social and political conditions. For example, Jordan (2009) and Kapoor's (2009) analysis of, respectively the World Bank and the Adivasi ("untouchables") of the Indian state of Orissa, shows that there is a real and palpable tension in both the trajectory of PAR and its uses as a tool for particular kinds of social change. In the former instance, it is evident that cloaked within the apparently progressive academic discourses of social capital (Fine, 2009) used by the World Bank (and many other international development agencies and NGOs), the concept and practice of participation, unequivocally, has been subordinated to a neo-liberal agenda that in many respects mirrors the aims, objectives, and priorities of nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism. This kind of analysis is also explored in Chovanec and Gonzalez's (2009) study of young women activists in the northern Chilean city of Arica. They note that the young women activists that they worked with had become increasingly critical of the imperialist illusion of participation orchestrated by successive liberal-democratic governments installed after civil rule was re-established in 1989. For these women, a critical praxis of action and reflection became central to developing a critique of neo-liberal policies that continues unabated in the contemporary era, despite the demise of the Pinochet dictatorship that occurred after this period. The analysis presented by Chovanec and Gonzalez is that in order to counter neo-liberal constructions of participation generated by institutions such as the World Bank, practitioners of PAR must engage the groups and populations with whom they work in a systematic analysis of the social relations of capitalism to prevent cynicism, disillusionment and disengagement. On the other hand, Kapoor's argument is that it is important to distinguish between what he labels participatory academic research (or par), as opposed to PAR arising from an embedded and organic process rooted in the concerns of marginalized groups. For academics using participatory research methods with subaltern groups such as the Adivasi in India, this inevitably poses questions about in whose interests the research process is being organized. For Kapoor the only way to ensure that a PAR process is initiated and sustained is for academic researchers to continually work at embedding all aspects of participatory research in a living praxis, where participants learn to take control and academic researchers become willing hostages to their concerns. Other dimensions of this tension, between the rationalities and imperatives driving funded academic research and the concerns and issues of particular groups and populations who constitute the focus of participatory research, is also explored by a number of other authors, including Kincheloe (2009), Lange (2009), Barua (2009), Veissere (2009), and Walsh (2009). Each of these authors discuss the tendency for participatory forms of research to become embroiled in a politics of cooption that is exercised either through the disciplinary character and history of their research paradigm (e.g., Veissere and Walsh in relation to Anthropology), or the social organization of participation itself (e.g., Kincheloe, Lange, Barua). The common point made by all these authors, however, is that in participatory research it is the politics of research that has to be actively engaged with to prevent co-option and subordination to the disciplinary knowledge making processes of Western scholarship.

### IV. KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND THE CRITIQUE OF MAINSTREAM SOCIAL SCIENCES

Two inter-related themes that have historically defined PAR are: a) PAR's role in creating new forms of knowledge from the standpoint of subaltern groups; b) its relationship to the mainstream social sciences. Weber-Pillwax (2009), for example, provides a reflective account of her experiences in dealing with various levels of Canadian government and universities in trying to secure acceptance and legitimacy for indigenous (Cree) ways of knowing, perceiving, and experiencing the social world within a predominantly mono-cultural educational system. As she observes in her account of the internal struggles she engaged in

with Northland School Board over the 1980s and 1990s, the indigenous participatory elements of her culture provided the intellectual and spiritual resources to confront, challenge, and negotiate spaces for Cree knowledge with the dominant administrative apparatuses of the school system. For Weber-Pilwax, PAR represents an everyday revolution that facilitates the movement of aboriginal people between their indigenous culture and the institutions of the colonial power. Chambers and Balanoff (2009) make a similar argument in relation to their *Ulukhaktok Literacies Research Project*. The legacies of colonization by the Canadian state, they observe, has had profoundly negative implications for the Inuit people that they work and research with in Northern Canada. In particular, they note that the introduction of an educational system imposed from the South effectively disrupted and fragmented traditional knowledge producing practices that had historically been part of Inuit culture. It is against this background that they initiated their PAR-based *Ulukhaktok Literacies Research Project* as a means to re-invigorate traditional approaches to learning and knowledge creation that are both relevant and meaningful within the broader context of Inuit culture. They also point out, however, that the criteria used by Canadian federal and provincial funding agencies do not only mitigate against supporting PAR projects such as theirs, but also work to undermine indigenous intellectuals from leading them as Principal Investigators. In this respect the conceptual practices of the social sciences imposes a double deficit on research within indigenous communities. This is a view echoed by Conrad and Kendall in *Making Space for Youth* (2009), where they note that not only is conventional social scientific research (e.g., survey questionnaires) “problematic and inappropriate [...] yielding ineffectual results” on homeless/street involved youth in Canada, but that it is often utilized as a “stalling tactic” by “tight fist” governments who are reluctant or averse to fund policies that constructively engage with the problem. As a consequence, Kendall and Conrad’s response has been to establish PAR partnerships between iHuman (an NGO) and university researchers that engage homeless/street involved youth in arts-based, participatory projects, that draw on their oral traditions, stories, life histories, photographs, radio, music, myths, etc., in making digital art video narratives of their lives. Similarly, Barua (2009), Belkacem (2009), and Shiza (2009) deal with the issue of how indigenous cultures with strong participatory traditions—and their respective knowledge generating traditions, customs, and practices—collide and come into conflict with hegemonic systems of thought that either undermine or repress them. Barua (2009) discusses this process in relation to the changing character of funding and policy direction of NGOs concerning micro-credit in Bangladesh; for Belkacem (2009) it concerns the contradictory situation of the Berber, caught between fundamentalist Islam and state surveillance; whereas Shiza’s (2009) study focuses on how Western conceptual practices of science education imposed by colonization have systematically excluded indigenous knowledges from the school curriculum, despite their obvious relevance to contemporary debates on sustainable development.

Last, it is important to draw attention to the inter-disciplinary and experimental knowledge making practices of these PAR projects. These range from Walsh’s (2009) use of video documentary techniques with shack dwellers in Durban (South Africa), arts-based techniques employed by Harata and Greenwood (2009) in developing Maori literacy programs for teachers in New Zealand, to the construction of digital life histories that Conrad and Kendall (2009) explored with homeless youth in Edmonton (Canada). What is striking about all these examples, is that practitioners of PAR are experimenting with methodologies and methods that are far more innovative than those used by conventional social science or educational research.

## V. SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEARNING AND PAR

Perhaps the most influential work on adult learning in recent years is Foley’s (1999) *Learning in Social Action*. Foley’s insistence on the pivotal role of informal learning in the everyday lives of people under capitalism has had profound effects on both research conducted on the learning that adults do within particular contexts (work, leisure, domestic contexts) and the way in which learning as a complex, multi-faceted activity, has been understood. Foley’s observations that learning—particularly informal learning—is an integral aspect of all human activity and that it is shaped by interpersonal, institutional, and broader social and political forces (see Jordan, 2003), has clear parallels with PAR in its focus on the generation of

critically-reflexive learning and its relationship to politics and social change within capitalist societies. Valerie Kwai-Pun's (2009) study of WACAM (Wassa Association of Communities Affected by Mining), the NGO that spontaneously emerged in Ghana in 1998, reveals how a PAR inspired national popular education movement involving sixty communities and more than 10,000 people was created to contest and challenge the negative social and environmental impacts of gold mining by multinational corporations. As she convincingly shows, through its provision of workshops, training programs and community sensitization projects, WACAM has congealed into a national social movement constituting a culture of resistance to the incursions of unbridled capitalist development within Ghana over the last decade. Similar kinds of community activated anti-capitalist/neo-liberal learning are also analyzed by Chovanec and Gonzalez (2009) in their study of women's social movements in Chile, and by Kapoor (2009) in his study of indigenous Adivasi in Orissa. Another dimension of the learning that PAR can generate is provided by Conrad and Kendall's (2009) study of homeless/street involved youth, and Lange's (2009) work in her university extension classes with middle class professionals. In both instances, critically-reflexive participatory methods are used to bring self-awareness and heightened consciousness of the circumstances in which individuals find themselves, whether as homeless aboriginal youth on the streets of Edmonton, or as questioning middle class adults participating in university extension courses focused on sustainability. What these authors show is that: 1) PAR and learning are inseparable activities that are embedded within a tight dialectical relationship of mutual change and transformation; 2) PAR can, under certain circumstances, become a powerful tool for the generation of critical and otherwise anti-capitalist forms of learning for both individuals and communities; 3) informal learning is key to understanding the complex dimensions of knowledge creation within social movements and, therefore, forms of everyday praxis that sustain PAR.

## VI. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND PAR

As Smith (1999) has shown, while indigenous people have strong and ongoing traditions of direct participation within their cultures, these have largely disappeared within industrial capitalist societies with the advance of technical rationality, instrumental reason, and the proliferation of the wage labor-capital relation. This process has been one of uneven development in the sense that while increasing numbers of aboriginal communities around the globe have become increasingly subject to penetration by the capital relation, there are still others that have protected and maintained the integrity of their traditions, languages and cultures. As a consequence, some aboriginal communities have managed to maintain and reproduce social relations and practices that effectively constitute organic forms of PAR that are specific to the indigenous cultures that generate them. Conrad and Kendall (2009), Kapoor (2009), Kwai-Pun (2009), Shiza (2009), Mhina (2009), and Weber-Pillwax (2009) show that these cultures of PAR do not only act as deep reservoirs in the reproduction of language, knowledge/skill, experience and understanding, but they also provide local resources for resistance and negotiation against the globalizing tendencies of neo-liberalism across a wide range of contexts in both the advanced capitalist societies, as well as those of the Global South. Among other things, what they appear to do most effectively is provide strong cultural spaces that are compatible with research-based forms of PAR. For example, Weber-Pillwax perceives strong continuities between Cree notions of communal space denoted by *sakaw*, as does Mhina and Shiza in their descriptions of, respectively, *Tweyambe* and *dare/indaba*. What is significant about these cultural spaces is that while they are constituted by social relations that express principles of a PAR informed praxis (e.g., direct participation, democratic discussion and debate, inclusiveness, a concern with social justice etc.), they also pose alternative sources of knowledge-producing practices from dominant Western sciences. Smith (1999) has already shown how such practices might be used to reconceptualize the ways in which research is conducted in relation to aboriginal peoples, as well as the dominant culture, by rejecting predominantly positivist and structuralist paradigms in favor of approaches that attempt to work outside and are critical of the hegemonic discourses of the academy. Such an indigenous research methodology (IRM) as Weber-Pillwax (2009) calls it, is not just simply a set of technical, how to, methods for conducting forms of PAR, but emphasizes the fundamental connections between history, culture, politics

and research i.e. that any kind of research is laden with questions of value, human judgment and politics irrespective of its disciplinary grounding.

## VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the commencement of global recession in late 2008, capitalism has once again entered a period of uncertainty, if not crisis, not known since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The impact of this is still unraveling, but what is clear is that governments around the globe have responded to the crisis by adopting familiar policies that have, or will lead to, major cut backs in social provision (health, education, and social security), as well as further deregulation of employment laws to induce greater ‘flexibility’ in labour markets (i.e. casualisation, depressing wages, revoking employment rights). Whether Greece, the UK, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or countries located in the Global South, this policy regime arises from the social relations of neo-liberal accumulation typically expressed in the popular imagination by the ‘free market.’ However, as the historian E. P. Thompson has warned, the ‘Market is [...] a mask worn by particular interests, which are not coincident with those of “the nation” or “community”, but which are interested, above all, in being mistaken to be so’ (1991).

In making this observation, we want to draw attention to the following points that we made earlier in this paper: i) that the last three decades of historical drift under neo-liberalism has produced homogenizing and assimilationist tendencies in social/educational research that have affected PAR; ii) that this tendency has led to professionalization that continues to reconstitute PAR as a scientific/technical Endeavour divorced from its antecedents in a radical and emancipatory politics; iii) that participatory approaches to research, are being co-opted by academic researchers, the professions and managerial consultants (e.g. program evaluators) as a means to enhancing forms of social regulation that support and sustain the social relations of neo-liberal accumulation. This brings us back to Thompson’s observation above. There is a widely held illusion that just because a research methodology is participatory that it must, by its very nature, be progressive, democratic and inclusive. Many of our graduate students and colleagues for instance, appear to be favouring participatory methodologies in the current period because of its apparent connection with older and deeply embedded associations with democratic traditions. Indeed, a similar logic propels the adoption of other forms of research such as critical ethnography (2003). To paraphrase Thompson, our point here is that participation might well be a mask that is not necessarily coincident with those democratic traditions, but which is interested in being mistaken to be so.

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ii For example, according to the World Commission on Dams, dams alone have displaced 80 million people reducing them to “development refugees” (Rajagopal, 2004).