

*Cowards Don't Make History* examines the early history of what has come to be known as participatory action research (PAR). A widely used methodology that is claimed and disputed by grassroots social movements and nongovernmental organizations, as well as corporations, bureaucracies, and international development organizations, PAR traces its origins to relationships forged between social movements and politically progressive intellectuals in the Third World and the margins of the developed world in the 1960s and 1970s. Working in numerous locations, including Brazil, Colombia, India, Tanzania, and the Appalachian region of the United States, participatory researchers constructed a methodology that would foster horizontal relationships, erasing distinctions between researchers and “the researched,” encouraging a dialogue between academic and people’s knowledge, and transforming research into a tool of consciousness-raising and political organizing.

As Australian participatory researcher Robin McTaggart explains, “Authentic participation in research means sharing in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world. It means ownership, that is, responsible agency in the production of knowledge and improvement of practice” (1997: 28). Responsible agency is made possible by grassroots participation in setting the research agenda, collecting the data, and controlling the ways in which the information is used (McTaggart 1997: 29). It also involves alternating research with practice, so that the work of consciousness-raising feeds into the work of organizing and mobilization, which, in turn, supplies new research questions (Gaventa 1988; Vio Grossi 1981).

Paulo Freire insists in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that such a combination of research with activism stimulates a profound and politically effective critical awareness of reality (which he calls “praxis”):

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. In this sense, the

praxis is the new *raison d'être* of the oppressed; and the revolution, which inaugurates the historical moment of this *raison d'être*, is not viable apart from their concomitant conscious involvement. Otherwise, action is pure activism. (2005 [1970]: 66)

In the early years of PAR, the political action that practitioners called for was revolutionary. While it was intimately local, based in grassroots communities, the intention of participatory research was to transform the broader social system. Today, we don't use the same radical language as Freire did in the 1960s and 1970s, but PAR practitioners—at least, those involved with critical variants of PAR, those who work within popular movements and grassroots communities—continue to orient small-scale and intense research relationships toward the transformation of institutions, values, and behaviors in order to create a just society (Fine 2017). As Carlos Rodrigues Brandão puts it, the contribution made by participatory research is not so much to establish a rigorous set of research practices or analyses as it is to promote “the collective search for knowledge that will make human beings not only more educated and wise, but also more fair, free, critical, creative, participatory, co-responsible, and expressing solidarity” (2005: 45).

There is no rule book for PAR; in fact, some prefer to call it an “epistemology” (Fine 2017: 80) or “a series of commitments to observe and problematise through practice the principles for conducting social enquiry” (McTaggart 1994: 315), as opposed to a “methodology.” Its lack of a concrete recipe derives from the fact that each PAR playbook evolves over time out of a dialectical relationship between the community and external researchers, as well as between theory and practice (Hall 1982, 1992). That is to say, as a participatory project unfolds, a dialogue is established between local knowledge and the knowledge that external researchers bring to the relationship, lending a specificity that is unique to the circumstances of each collaborative endeavor. In this sense, both the objectives of the investigation and the techniques researchers use grow out of the context itself, combining approaches as diverse as feminist theory (Dyrness 2008), ethnography (Fals Borda and Brandão 1986: 41–42), even quantitative methods (Fine 2017: chap. 5), with autochthonous methods of collecting information and local conceptual vehicles for making sense of reality (Archila Neira 2015; Casa de Pensamiento n.d.).

Participatory research has accumulated over time a particularly rich experience in Latin America, germinating in the social movements of the last quarter of the twentieth century among peasants, indigenous peoples and Afrodescendants, shantytown dwellers and industrial workers. Fruitful collaboration

between researchers and popular movements blossomed since the 1970s, more often than not at the margins of the university or sometimes entirely outside of it in popular education collectives, grassroots organizations, barrios, and rural villages. It would be too simple, however, to state that a project is participatory merely because local people engage in some way in it, since conventional ethnographers have for decades enlisted the participation of their informants. In contrast, PAR, as it has developed in Latin America, is also participatory because the researchers themselves espouse the aspirations of the organization with which they are collaborating, both by placing people's knowledge on an equal footing with academic knowledge and by embracing the political objectives of the groups with which they are working (Brandão 2005: 56).

One of the early experimenters in participatory methodologies was the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1925–2008). From 1972 to 1974 he entered into a collaboration with the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC) in the department of Córdoba on Colombia's Caribbean coast. His work involved fostering the participation of peasant cadres in conducting interviews with leaders of agrarian movements of the first part of the twentieth century. They engaged in co-analyses of their circumstances at training workshops; their stories were narrated in comics format—all with the intention that these lessons would contribute to the creation of political strategies in the present. Fals Borda called his approach “action research” (not to be confused with the action research practiced at the time in North America). Although he wrote about his experience, which was also evaluated by numerous social scientists in the decades after the project ended, there is only scant analysis of the activities in which he, his associates, and ANUC leaders engaged. Most publications highlight the theory behind this innovative attempt at redefining research and the products that emerged from it—training workshops, graphic histories, historical texts accessible to readers with minimal schooling, testimonial literature and chronicles [*crónicas*—but neglect to depict the process that underlaid these achievements, despite the fact that process, and not product, was what was (and still is) at the heart of participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury 2008).

*Towards Don't Make History* takes advantage of the abundant archival materials that Fals Borda left behind, reading his papers through the lens of a dialogue with many of the activists themselves, as well as with some of today's PAR practitioners. In this book, I try to make sense of what the authors of this methodology thought research was and how they organized the fusion of peasant knowledge and academic inquiry into a participatory endeavor. I probe the ways that the knowledge emanating from this extended conversation

contributed to activism, particularly to ANUC's strategy of occupying large landholdings and administering them in novel ways.

When I began this project, I was not completely convinced that participatory action research held the promise that had been touted by so many. I had several decades of collaborative ethnographic research under my belt in conjunction with indigenous intellectuals from the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), an indigenous organization founded in the early 1970s that was initially part of ANUC and was inspired by many of the same methodological approaches that Fals Borda employed in Córdoba. We formulated conceptual models for analyzing indigenous politics in southern Colombia at the turn of the millennium, making the results available for use by the organization's bilingual education program, some of whose activists were members of the research team. I was convinced that collaborative ethnography was superior to participatory action research, which had become a mainstay of conventional applied social science; like many academic anthropologists, I was keen to distinguish my research from that of my applied colleagues. I now know that I was blinded by the use of participatory methods by international development organizations like USAID (United States Agency for International Development) to further their own objectives, as well as by the fact that many non-governmental organizations have appropriated techniques from PAR without paying heed to its founding principles. I neglected to recognize that many of the nonindigenous activists I met in CRIC, from whom I had imbibed collaborative research philosophies and methods, had originally begun their work inspired by Fals Borda; I worked with CRIC's educational activists without recognizing their quite obvious appropriations of his methodology. I listened to the criticisms of social scientists—that Fals Borda was paternalistic and dependent on academic models, that he never effectively reached the peasant rank and file—and lost sight of how profoundly he turned social science and activism on their heads. With the passing years, as my understanding of Fals Borda's project in Córdoba deepened through visits to the archives, conversations with his associates, and contact with PAR practitioners, I came to appreciate how unique and innovative these first attempts at participatory action research really were, even as, with hindsight, I came to identify the fissures that emerged during this early methodological experiment—frailties that I will not obscure in the following pages.

I am an ethnographer. I examine everyday practices and meanings to flesh them out in interpretations that are at once analytic and descriptive. I have conducted ethnographic research in indigenous communities where, as a participant observer, I experienced the flow of everyday life as an eyewitness, sub-

sequently creating ethnographic scenarios in which I probed the significance of my observations. In a sense, I do the same thing in this book, only the experiences I am observing come to me secondhand from archives and interviews, information I flesh out with the help of my imagination. As I will describe in the coming pages, Fals Borda advocated an interpretive technique he called “imputation,” by means of which he seized hold of historical information and gave it body through his empirically informed imagination. Imputation was not only something he availed himself of in his scholarly writings, but was for him a fundamental feature of the interstices between research and action: it was only by inhabiting the past that one could imagine the future, whether one was a sociologist or a peasant activist.

I hope that for some readers this book will expand their appreciation of how daring and transformative the social science of the global South really is. Fals Borda saw his contributions as inherently Latin American, a situated response to the social science he had learned at the University of Minnesota during his master’s training and his doctoral studies at the University of Florida. The models he learned in the United States, as well as the methods he was taught to gather and analyze empirical data, did not fit the Colombian reality he lived, because these conceptual schemes were fashioned out of North American and European experience. Realizing their unsuitability, Fals Borda was forced to explore new ways of approaching the society in which he lived. *Cowards Don’t Make History* documents a brief sliver of his intellectual life, when his politics blended most intimately with his identity as a Colombian and his mission as an intellectual.

The ethnographic detail I uncover comes from a process of triangulating archival materials with what I learned from interviews and my analysis of a series of graphic histories that Fals Borda and his associates produced between 1972 and 1974, drawn by a local artist, Uliánov Chalarka. I am by no means an expert at analyzing the visual language of comics. Instead, I attempt to read these graphic histories as traces of an activist research methodology. For some readers, this peek into the political use of Latin American graphic narrative may stimulate them to make deeper forays into an intellectually provocative artistic movement that is committed to social transformation and justice.

Finally, it is my hope that PAR practitioners will approach *Cowards Don’t Make History* as an example of what participatory methods could and could not achieve at a particular moment in time and a specific location. That is to say, Fals Borda’s experience does not afford us a model of which techniques activist researchers should adopt in the twenty-first century. Instead, it must be mined for its big ideas: What does it mean to create relationships of equality

in research? What can social movements learn from history, and how can historical investigation be used to promote a more just society? How can serious research be coupled with progressive political objectives? How should social science be used to resolve violent conflict? How can the history of social science become more than an academic exercise? At the end of this book, I ask these questions of a series of teams engaged in participatory research in different parts of Colombia, bringing Fals Borda's past of the 1970s into my readers' present.

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The staff of the Centro de Documentación Regional “Orlando Fals Borda,” of the Banco de la República in Montería, collaborated with my research in many ways. Not only did they make Fals Borda's personal papers available to me on my annual trips since 2008, but they also opened their facilities to the numerous workshops I facilitated, permitting me to discuss the significance of the archive with local activists and students; on various occasions the Banco also funded my trips to Colombia and to Montería. I am especially grateful to the Centro's staff—Diana Carmona Nobles, Ana María Espinosa Baena, María Angélica Herrera, Emerson Sierra, and Rita Díaz Sibaja—as well as to Claudia Marcela Bernal, the manager of the Banco de la República in Montería. Gabriel Escalante, the curator of Fals Borda's papers at the Archivo Central e Histórico of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, was equally attentive to my research needs and as devoted to preserving Fals's intellectual legacy as are his colleagues in Montería. My work with the ANUC archives of the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), which had been lost some years before in a flood, was first made possible when Alex Pereira gave me scanned copies of some of the documents it contained; later, Leon Zamosc

sent me the entire archive in digital form. Mónica Moreno shared with me the documentation she collected at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. Without access to these archival holdings, this book would not have been possible.

I have been privileged to participate in a series of lively conversations taking place in a network of young scholars who are studying Fals Borda's archives: Zoraida Arcila Aristizábal, Juan Mario Díaz, Mónica Moreno, and Jafte Robles Lomeli are forging new paths in the history of social science in Latin America. Jafte, along with Nohora Arrieta, Valentina Pernet, Alfredo Poggi, and Douglas McRae, participated in a 2014 seminar I taught at Georgetown, in which we read *Historia doble de la Costa*, the Fundación del Caribe's and La Rosca's publications for peasant readerships, and worked with Fals Borda's archives, ultimately resulting in a special issue of *Tábula Rasa*, shepherded by its indefatigable editor, Leonardo Montenegro. I have been gratified to witness the recent expansion of this group with a new crop of dissertation writers, including Juanita Rodríguez and Julián Gómez Delgado. Other colleagues who have studied Fals Borda, were close to him, or have themselves engaged in politically committed research have been important sounding boards for me, including José María Rojas, Myriam Jimeno Santoyo, Elías Sevilla Casas, and Normando Suárez. My ongoing collaboration with researchers affiliated with CINEP, the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca, and the Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca have kept me grounded in the real-world applications of my research; my thanks to Marcela Amador, Mauricio Archila, Graciela Bolaños, Martha Cecilia García, Diana Granados, Vicente Otero Chate, Libia Tattay, Pablo Tattay, and Rosalba Velasco.

Orlando and Utamaro Chalarca opened Ulianov Chalarka's artistic world to me. They have been gracious and compassionate guides. I dedicate this book to the memory of Ulianov, Orlando's brother and Utamaro's uncle. I never had the privilege of meeting him, but he has occupied—some would say, monopolized—my attention over the past decade.

When I first visited Montería, I was extremely fortunate to meet Víctor Negrete, one of the founders of the Fundación del Caribe and a tireless promoter of participatory research on the Caribbean coast. He has served over the past decade as my mentor. Víctor continues to remind me that the archival material I am studying was produced by activists intent on making Córdoba and Colombia a better place. Víctor and his wife, Liuber Bravo, made my visits to Montería welcoming with their hospitality, conversation, and their willingness to introduce me to other activists. Carmen Ortega Otero also opened the

academic and artistic worlds of Montería, and became a close friend to me, for which I am deeply grateful.

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Portions of this book derive from, correct, and expand on earlier publications in which I made my first forays into analyzing Orlando Fals Borda's papers. They include: "El cobarde no hace historia': Orlando Fals Borda y la doble historia de la Costa del Caribe," in Mabel Moraña and José Manuel Valenzuela, eds., *Precariedades, exclusiones, emergencias: Necropolítica y sociedad civil en América Latina, 175–198* (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana/Gedisa, 2017); "La Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social: Reimagining History as Collaborative Exchange in 1970s Colombia," in Peter Lambert and Björn Weiler, eds., *How the Past Was Used: Historical Cultures, c. 750–2000*, 231–258 (London: Proceedings of the British Academy, 2017); "Rethinking the Meaning of Research in Collaborative Relationships," *Collaborative Anthropologies* 9 (2018) 1–2: 1–31; "Visualidad y escritura como acción: La IAP en la Costa del Caribe colombiano," *Revista Colombiana de Sociología* 41 (2018) 1: 133–156; and, coauthored with Jafte Robles Lomeli, "Imagining Latin American Social Science from the Global South: Orlando Fals Borda and Participatory Research," *Latin American Research Review* 53 (2018) 3: 597–611.

For the past ten years, David Gow has put up with my obsession with Orlando Fals Borda and Uliyanov Chalarka. His personal library supplied me with

first editions of some of Fals Borda's reflections on action research. He has politely listened to my never-ending discourses on comics and has obliged me by reading some of my favorites. He went over my manuscript several times, offering me pointed and always relevant commentary. Afterward, he could invite me to set Fals Borda aside and enjoy a glass or two of wine and some of the exquisite cheese he hunts for on sale each week. I am a very fortunate person to be sharing my life with him.