

The Applied Theatre Reader

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PARTICIPATION

Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary – A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, Zed Books (1999), pp. 120–9.

Popular participation

ACTIVISTS STRONGLY FAVOURING participatory development argue that they are fully aware of the reasons why politicians and development planners try to co-opt the concept of participation for their own ends. In their view, the types of interaction they propose are precisely intended to prevent all such hegemonistic and manipulative designs. They therefore believe the concept should be further refined – ‘popular participation’ being able to save development from its present crisis and give it new stamina for enabling the grassroots populations to regenerate their life spaces.

An UNRISD discussion paper defines popular participation as ‘the organized efforts to increase control over resources and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control’.¹ For Orlando Fals-Borda, Anisur Rahman and many other PAR theorists,² the aim of such a participation is to achieve power:

a special kind of power – people’s power – which belongs to the oppressed and exploited classes and groups and their organizations, and the defence of their just interests to enable them to advance towards shared goals of social change within a participatory system.³

As a rule, participation is advocated by PAR theorists as the only way to save development from degenerating into a bureaucratic, top-down and dependency creating institution. They do not question the validity of the institution, *per se*, which

most of them consider could be a powerful instrument in the hands of the oppressed. They do insist, however, that, for development to play its historical role, it should be based on participation. Genuine processes of dialogue and interaction should thus replace the present subject-object relationships between intervenors and the intervened, thereby enabling the oppressed to act as the free subjects of their own destiny.

The assumptions underlying the popular participatory approach can be summarized as follows:

- (a) Present obstacles to people's development can and should be overcome by giving the populations concerned the full opportunity of participating in all the activities related to their development.
- (b) Participation is justified because it expresses not only the will of the majority of people, but also it is the only way for them to ensure that the important moral, humanitarian, social, cultural and economic objectives of a more humane and effective development can be peacefully attained.
- (c) 'Dialogical interaction', 'conscientization', 'PAR' and other similar activities can make it possible for all the people to organize themselves in a manner best suited to meet their desired ends.

When the concept of popular participation was initially advanced by its promoters as a key element in creating an alternative, human-centred development, it was intended to perform at least four functions: a cognitive, a social, an instrumental and a political one.

In cognitive terms, participation had to regenerate the development discourse and its practices, on the basis of a different mode of understanding of the realities to be addressed. It expressed the belief that the cognitive bases of conventional development not only belonged to an irrelevant episteme, representing an ethnocentric perception of reality specific to Northern industrialized countries, but were also no longer able to serve the objectives of a sound development. They had to be replaced by a different knowledge system, representing people's own cultural heritage, in particular the locally produced *techné*. Popular participation was to carve out a new meaning for, and a new image of, development, based on different forms of interaction and a common search for this new 'popular' knowledge.

The political function of participation was to provide development with a new source of legitimation, assigning to it the task of empowering the voiceless and the powerless and also, eventually, of creating a bridge between the Establishment and its target populations, including even the groups opposing development.

The instrumental function of the participatory approach was to provide the 're-empowered' actors of development with new answers to the failure of conventional strategies, and to propose new alternatives, with a view to involving the 'patients' in their own care.

Finally, in social terms, participation was the slogan which gave the development discourse a new lease of life. All institutions, groups and individuals involved in development activities rallied around the new construct in the hope that the participatory approach would finally enable development to meet everyone's basic needs and to wipe out poverty in all its manifestations.

The pitfalls of empowerment

The new methodologies of interaction inspired by the PAR and conscientization approaches did initially create waves of enthusiasm and hope, mainly amongst fieldworkers engaged in grassroots activities. The rush for the rapid creation of a 'popular knowledge', aimed at destroying the pernicious monopoly of the dominant paradigm, served as a contagious incentive to promote often inspiring activities in such fields as literacy and regeneration of traditional know-how. Particularly in a number of technical areas, it succeeded in denouncing the often dangerous and inhibitive impacts, on people's lives, of imported and irrelevant technologies. Here and there, but mainly at the local level, it served to keep alive the population's resentment against the most visible aspects of political and social discrimination. It also helped some bright elements to be recognized as local leaders, and gain a wider perception of their communities' possibilities of action.

Yet, there is not enough evidence to indicate that a new kind of knowledge did emerge from the process, 'in such a way that the dominated, underdeveloped societies can articulate their own socio-political position on the basis of their own values and capacities.'

While participatory thinkers do admit that all knowledge systems carry a number of values and biases,⁴ they seem to exclude the possibility that, as products of a certain knowledge born out of the economic/developmental age, they could be, themselves, the carriers of very questionable values and biases. Neither do they pay enough attention to the fact that traditional or local knowledge systems suffer, too, from similar, sometimes even more inhibitive prejudices. The fact that the latter have been distorted and confused by the processes of change in the colonial and development eras does not change the picture. As such, any attempt to realize a mix of the two knowledges,⁵ represented by local and outside persons interacting with each other, is not only a conceptually reductionist and patchwork type of exercise, but also may turn out to be a strange mix of very heterogeneous biases. The exercise tends, finally, to disregard the following very basic principle of learning – that no one learns who claims to know already in advance. Reality is the unknown which has to be 'dis-covered' together, free from all the presuppositions and influences of the known.

The notion of empowerment was intended to help participation perform one main political function – to provide development with a new source of legitimation. As already made clear in the first part of this essay, the intentions of the pioneers of participation were, indeed, pure and noble. They were right to consider that the tremendous abuses of power by oppressors had to be stopped, and the victims be provided with new possibilities of defending themselves. Yet, in practice, the empowerment discourse raised a number of important questions, both at the theoretical and practical levels. As some of these issues suggest that the discourse can eventually produce opposite results, the matter deserves to be more deeply explored.

When A considers it essential for B to be empowered, A assumes not only that B has no power – or does not have the right kind of power – but also that A has the secret formula of a power to which B has to be initiated. In the current participatory ideology, this formula is, in fact, nothing but a revised version of state power, or what could be called fear-power.

The crux of the matter is that the populations actually subjected to this fear-power are not at all powerless. Theirs is a different power which is not always perceived as such, and cannot be actualized in the same manner, yet it is very real in many ways.⁶ It is constituted by the thousands of centres and informal networks of resistance which ordinary people put up, often quietly, against the prevailing power apparatuses. Amongst others, it manifests itself in the reality of 'tax payers cheating the state, young people evading conscription, farmers accepting subsidies or equipment from development projects and diverting them to their own ends, technicians or repairmen working without permits or licences, government paid teachers using the classroom to denounce government abuses of power.'⁷

As a result, there is little evidence to indicate that the participatory approach, as it evolved, did, as a rule, succeed in bringing about new forms of people's power. Instead, there are indications that the way many an activist interpreted their mission contributed to dis-valuing the traditional and vernacular forms of power. More often than not, they helped replace them with a most questionable notion of power, highly influenced by that of the leftist traditions in Europe. This vision of power did, in practice, prove useful to the development establishment. For it helps it to persuade its target populations that not only are economic and state authorities the real power, but that they are also within everyone's reach, provided everyone is ready to participate fully in the development design. . . .

Participation: boon, myth, or danger?

. . . Participation, which is also a form of intervention, is too serious and ambivalent a matter to be taken lightly, or reduced to an amoeba word lacking in any precise meaning, or a slogan, or fetish or, for that matter, only an instrument or a methodology. Reduced to such trivialities, not only does it cease to be a boon, but it runs the risk of acting as a deceptive myth or a dangerous tool for manipulation. To understand the many dimensions of participation, one needs to enquire seriously into all its roots and ramifications, these going deep into the heart of human relationships and the socio-cultural realities conditioning them.

As has already been noted, 'relating' is intrinsic to the very act of being and living.* To live is to relate, or to participate in the wider living world of which one is only a part. To relate to that world, and to the human beings composing it, is an act of great consequence which cannot and need not be mediated. As such, one's inability fully to assume this vital necessity should only be understood. Only this understanding, by the subject and the others interacting with him, can enable one to overcome that predicament. No democratic or participatory panacea can give an ailing society of dead or conditioned persons what they individually do not have. Contemporary history is particularly rich in cases where induced participation in projects of an ideological national or ethnic nature had repeatedly led to frightfully self-destructive tragedies. After all, slogans of participation have accompanied the events which led to the physical or mental destruction of millions of innocent people in Germany, the USSR, Cambodia, India, Iran, Iraq and elsewhere.

All these difficulties point to a basic dilemma facing the participatory phenomenon. How to reconcile two facts: the fact that no form of social interaction or participation can ever be meaningful and liberating, unless the participating

individuals act as free and un-biased human beings; and the second fact that all societies hitherto have developed commonly accepted creeds (religions, ideologies, traditions, etc.) which, in turn, condition and help produce inwardly un-free and biased persons? The dilemma is particularly difficult to resolve at a time when the old ways of socio-cultural conditioning have taken on new and frightening forms. The economization of life with all its implications (cultural, political and social) – is subjecting its participants, all over the world, to often invisible and structural processes of addictive manipulation. As a result, people are led to believe that their very biases, their conditioning and their inner lack of freedom, are not only the expressions of their freedom, but also of an even greater freedom still to be achieved.

Beyond participation

In real life, the dilemma is addressed differently, according to the great diversity of situations and cultures. In recent years, a number of grassroots movements have demonstrated particular creativity, both in bringing up new forms of leadership and 'animation', and in combining the inner and outer requirements of participation.

In relation to the first achievement, the presence within such movements of sometimes very sensitive 'animators', able to listen to their own people, to the world at large, and to the roots of their common culture, has enabled them to cultivate the possibilities of action and self-discovery dormant in the 'common man'. To take only the Indian scene, the Gandhian, the Chipko, the Lokayan and Swadhyaya movements are good examples of the way such inspiring animators have interacted with their fellow countrymen. Drawing on the most enduring and inspiring aspects of people's traditions, some of them have been able to use these as living instruments of socio-cultural regeneration. New ways of working, acting and hoping together have been found, which have also given new meanings and expressions to modernity, in its real sense of *belonging to the present*. The fact that specially trained change agents do not play a major role in these movements has not generally prevented them from being highly animated by their own members, most of them acting as their own agents of change.

In the second area of achievement, a new feature, common to most of these genuine grassroots movements, seems to be the substitution of various modern methodologies, project designs, organizational schemas and fund-raising constraints, by more traditional and vernacular ways of interaction and leadership. As a rule, the necessity for a spiritual dimension, and for the revival of the sacred in one's everyday relationships with the world, seems to be rediscovered as a basic factor for the regeneration of people's space. Wherever this spiritual dimension⁸ has been present, it has, indeed, produced a staggering contagion of intelligence and creativity, much more conducive to people's collective 'efficiency' than any other conventional form of mass mobilization. In the above mentioned grassroots movements, this dimension has served as a most powerful instrument in reviving the old ideals of a livelihood based on love, conviviality and simplicity, and also in helping people to resist the disruptive effects of economization.

★ In that sense, to participate means to live and to relate differently. It implies, above all, the recovery of one's inner freedom, that is, to learn to listen and to share, free from any fear or predefined conclusion, belief or judgment. As inner

freedom is not necessarily dependent on outer freedom, its recovery is an essentially personal matter, and can be done even in a jail, or under the most repressive conditions. Yet it enables one not only to acquire a tremendous life power for the flowering of one's own life, but also to contribute, in a meaningful way, to everyone else's struggle for a better life. As such, inner freedom gives life to outer freedom, and makes it both possible and meaningful. On the other hand, while outer freedom is often a great blessing, and a necessity to protect people from violence and abuse, it remains hollow and subject to decay, in the absence of inner freedom. It can never, *per se*, help alienated persons to flower in goodness, or live in wisdom and beauty. Anyhow, participation soon turns into a parody, and an invitation to manipulative designs, when it represents only a ritual amongst alienated persons acting as programmed robots.

To live differently implies, secondly, that change be perceived as a process which starts from within, and defines as one pursues one's creative journey into the unknown. It does not mean to conform to a preordained pattern or ideal designed by others, or even one designed by one's own illusions and conditioned ideals. For change to happen and to make sense, it should represent the open-ended quest and interaction of free and questioning persons for the understanding of reality.

In a situation where these crucial dimensions of change are disregarded, or artificially severed from it, organized forms of participation or mobilization either serve illusory purposes, or lead to superficial and fragmented achievements of no lasting impact on people's lives. Even when these seem to be beneficial to a particular group or region, their effects remain inevitably limited, in time and space, sometimes even producing opposite effects in many unforeseen and unexpected areas.

On another plane, planned macro-changes (which are generally the *raison d'être* of development projects) are more the indirect result of millions of individual micro-changes, than of voluntarist programmes and strategies from above. In fact, they often represent a co-option of the unplanned micro-changes produced by others and elsewhere. When these reach a critical mass, and appear as a threat to the dominant knowledge/power centres at the top, they are co-opted and used by their professionals as an input for planned changes, aimed at turning the potential threat posed to the top into a possible asset for it. Hence, major projects of change from above generally represent an attempt, by those very forces under threat, to contain and redirect change, with a view to adapting it to their own interests, whenever possible with the victims' participation. This is how the real authors of most revolutions are, sooner or later, robbed of the changes they have provoked, and ultimately victimized by the professional ideologues and agitators acting on their behalf. This is how the pioneering participatory mendicants of the early development years were also robbed of their participatory ideal, as the latter was transmogrified into the present-day manipulative construct of participatory development.

Should that mean that anything any free human being does for change, even in its genuine and holistic sense, will inevitably be countered and/or co-opted by vested interests? Or should such realities invite those who seriously want to remain free, to live and to relate as such, to continue partaking in the world, free from fears of all kinds, including the fear of co-option? If the participatory ideal could, in simple terms, be redefined by such qualities as attention, sensitivity, goodness or compassion, and supported by such regenerative acts as learning, relating and listening, are not these qualities and gifts precisely impossible to co-opt? Are they

not, also, the same which always help flower, in others, their potentialities of inner transformation? To stay with this question could perhaps serve as a good companion to the activist looking for an answer to his or her life and to better ways of participating in other people's lives.

Notes

- 1 In a document produced by Matthias Stiefel and Marshall Wolfe. 'The Quest For Participation', UNRISD, Mimeographed Preliminary Report, June 1984, p. 12, the authors conclude that: 'The central issue of popular participation has to do with power, exercised by some people over the people, and by some classes over other classes ...'
- 2 PAR — i.e. Participatory Action Research — is a methodology, or approach, to both action and research. It was introduced in the '70s, first in Asia and Latin America, by different groups of activists/theorists working in grassroots developmental activities. PAR seeks to set in motion processes of social change by the populations themselves, as they perceive their own reality. Orlando Fals-Borda, one of its founders, views it as 'a methodology within a total existential process', aimed at 'achieving power and not merely growth for the grassroots populations'.
- 3 Orlando Fals-Borda, *Knowledge and People's Power*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1988, p. 2.
- 4 'Any science as a cultural product has a specific human purpose and therefore implicitly carries those biases and values which scientists hold as a group'. See Orlando Fals-Borda, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
- 5 The gist of this design can be found in the following statement by Orlando Fals-Borda: 'Academic knowledge combined with popular knowledge and wisdom may give, as a result, a total scientific knowledge of a revolutionary nature (and perhaps a new paradigm), which destroys the previous unjust class monopoly.' *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 6 The Gandhian movement was based on the assumption that Indian rural communities were invested with a much more forbidding power than that of the British administration. As such, Gandhi's persistent message to them was neither to oppose that illusory and corruptive power through violence, nor to try to seize it. Many of the present grassroots movements of India and elsewhere similarly believe that the narrow politics of capturing state power is often a last resort. For more on the question of power, see Majid Rahnema, 'Power and regenerative processes in micro-spaces', in *International Social Science Journal*, August 1988, No. 117, pp. 361-75.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 366.
- 8 Short of a less controversial word, 'spiritual' is used here to express the following qualities: sensitivity; the art of listening to the world at large and within one, free from the hegemony of a conditioned 'me' constantly interfering in the process; the ability to relate to others and to act, without any pre-defined plan or ulterior motives; and the perennial qualities of love, compassion and goodness which are under constant assault in economized societies. The spiritual dimension has nothing to do with the so-called religious, atheistic or scientific perceptions of the world. It expresses mainly the belief that human beings, in their relations with the world, are moved not only by material, economic or worldly interests. It recognizes the sacred dimension of life which transcends the latter, giving a higher meaning to such awesome acts as living, relating and loving. The spiritual dimension, it may be said, is generally inhibited by fanatical beliefs in the superiority of one religion over another. As such, contrary to its promoters' claims, it is totally absent in religious fundamentalist movements based on hate and violence.

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