From Action-to Participatory Research: Critical and affirmative implications of a research method

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Abstract:

Participatory research has a long history. As action research it was linked to agendas of societal change. Later, with the integration of NGO into the mainstream of the development business, it became integrated into development projects. Partly it became a tool for manipulation, partly it allowed for new approaches. The mainstreaming of participatory research turned, however, what once was a means for critical research into a tool for affirmation. Participation became an ideology to justify development projects. If participatory research has the objective to get the local views and priorities, then besides participatory sessions, the researchers should look at where people try to participate, i.e. articulate their demands. Participatory research is, like any research, part of the tensions between affirmative and critical scholarship. In principle, instead of participatory research as an end in itself, good research is required.

1. Introduction:

The idea of participatory research went through stages of transformation and translation. Initially, it was closely connected with social change and socialist revolution. As ANDERSON (1976) demonstrated, historically western Marxism underwent an important shift. While up to the 1920th Marxist theory and practice were closely connected, it got increasingly separated. The early socialist activists like Lenin, Luxemburg, Bebel and others were both: Theorists of Marxism and practical revolutionaries. There was a reason to it. As Marx pointed out, socialist revolution is only possible if the proletariat develops class consciousness as necessity to shift from being a class as such towards becoming a class for itself. Thus, class analysis was crucial to identify stages of capitalism as base for definition of appropriate political practice. This close combination between theoretical analysis and practice got dissolved. Starting already in the 1930th Marxist theory became a realm of intellectuals, often holding positions in universities. Namely in the 1960th and 70th the revival of Marxism was primarily an issue of intellectuals working in such positions.
The revival of Marxist thought had a clear base in post-colonialism. It emerged out of the discrepancy between the promises of modernization, of which freedom and liberty was an integral part, and the reality of governance by a small elite, often as compradors closely connected to large enterprises. Namely in Latin America the old entrenched elites limited reformist movements. While in the cities living conditions improved, the rural areas were still characterized by rather feudal relations and controlled by large multi-national enterprises. The emergence of “dependency theories” (FRANK 1978) in the sixties was based on the question of intellectuals why the countries were still underdeveloped. An answer was found in theories of imperialism. To turn this into practice, social movements had to develop. This could only be achieved, if the rural population would gain an understanding of their own subaltern position, i.e. develop class consciousness (see PAULO FREIRE).

In India the issues raised in dependency theory and Neo-Marxism were taken up. There, similar to Latin America, the question was raised in how far the rural areas of India are still feudal rather than capitalist. This was not just a question of terminology. It was a question of political strategy. If still feudal relations prevail, then changes towards a bourgeois capitalist society were needed, as this was seen as necessary pre-condition for socialism. In India too most Marxists were intellectuals, living in circumstances quite different from those taken as revolutionary subject.

In general, the situation was characterized by a stark difference between theory and practice. Those taking up Marxism and socialism were mainly middle class intellectuals in universities, while among workers and peasants these ideas had little appeal. Nevertheless the discrepancy between socialists that actually had a bourgeois class background and workers/peasants that were less interested in socialism posed problems with regards to the unity of theory and practice. ALTHUSSERS (1965) concept of “theoretical practice” synthesized to some degree this tensions, but still, most of those involved in “theoretical practice” had limited inclination with regards to other practices.

From this tension between theory and practice in Marxism, combined with the tension between ideology and class-consciousness, the concept of “action-research” was picked up. The basic idea of action research as formulated by LEWIN (1946), whose centre of attention were group dynamics and organizations, is that its focus are the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action using a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action. This has, of course, nothing to do with Marxism, but certainly with practices as well as conscious in the sense of rational planning of
actions and evaluating its effects. By engaging in “action research” the socialist intellectuals saw the chance to combine their work and theoretical practice with research that is designed in a pattern of political practice towards conscious rising. Action research is certainly not per se linked to Marxist approaches. What defines action-research is basically that instead of external analysis of rather static structural or personal data, the focus is on actions. An important implication of action-research was that the interpretation of the research findings was not done by the researcher alone but ideally, together with those involved in the action. Marxism and Neo-Marxism declined quite strongly after the 1970th. Instead of political-economic issues like exploitation, cultural issues and “identity” gained importance. The decline of socialist organisations initially left a void. This was, however, soon filled by NGOs. NGOs had not an agenda of liberation or revolution, or even of conscious raising of the wretched of the earth. Nevertheless change was important for them, but in a more reformist way. NGO received a surprising support from an unexpected source. During the 1980th the World Bank in particular shifted its policy from support of state agencies in their development efforts, towards de-regulation and privatization.

With the linking of mainstream development organizations and NGO, the approaches of the NGO received a kind of mainstreaming as well. This concerned less the objectives of cultural change, but more the bottom up approach, and the claimed integration of the grass roots into development activities. On this base the work of ROBERT CHAMBERS ET AL. (1993, 1997) received intensive attention firstly in Britain within the DFID and later spreading from there to most other development agencies.

CHAMBERS tried to solve two basic problems encountered by mainstream development policy:

1. An experimental “research station” approach: Experts were developing new hybrids, production techniques etc. that allowed income increases for farmers. The best example was certainly the green revolution. However, what worked in the experimental stations did not always work as well on the fields. A specific problem was that farmers were not always willing to take over these new techniques. This showed that besides technical expertise, knowledge on the socio-political and especially cultural conditions that allow for acceptance of new techniques was needed.

2. Especially in connection with the green revolution, a strong critique started that development projects do actually increase poverty and polarization in rural areas. This critique, which came mainly from social science and was often connected to NGO, stated that even though development projects may have a sound technological base, the analysis of socio-political and cultural factors was insufficient. As un-intended consequences, poverty would even increase.
This tension between the need to include the target groups, who later became stake-holders into the projects combined with the need for more research on the social, cultural and political conditions. However, anthropological and sociological studies tend to be more time consuming, here Chambers solved the problem. He used common anthropological and sociological research methods, combined them with visualization, and defined them as “rapid appraisal”. Applying these methods did not necessarily provide deep insights, but was sufficient to get an understanding what happened on the local level. Later, rapid appraisal became participatory, through group discussions between researchers, experts and target groups. The idea was that the local people have a local knowledge, which should usefully be applied in the projects, but was so far, widely ignored and thus wasted.

2. Structural aspects of participatory research:

Since the 1990th participatory appraisal became a need for most projects. In research we always have a researcher who is focussing on a research object. To get data from the research object different instruments are used. Except secondary data analysis, these methods are always “participatory” because they involve interaction. If the respondent does not answer we don’t have the data. But, research is not finished when the data are collected. The data have to be analyzed and finally interpreted. Data analysis as well as interpretation is done by the researcher. Action research differs from this basic pattern. The target group is not merely taken as a “container of information” to be taken out of this box, but itself generating data through action. The researcher should become to some degree part of those he is doing research on. Furthermore, data analysis and interpretation should be done collectively by all. The objective is not that the results are published, but that these are used again as base for further action. In action research, the collective is the subject. Here as well the argument of Gramsci (1971) of “organic intellectuals” gained relevance. Participatory research as conducted in the eighties follows this example to some degree; the researcher should reconstruct the local or emic views and knowledge. Quite often discrepancies between the ideas of the researcher and those he is looking at, evolve, especially when dealing with cultural issues. In difference to conventional approaches, these early perspectives of participatory research had an important implication. The idea was not to generate “objective” results, but biased interpretations. In mainstream development participatory research, in contrast, the people are those who provide needed information. Again, through the research process, they should be drawn into the project and find an own interest in it. In difference to earlier projects, now the target groups are taken as local experts, who should be taken serious. Interesting is the integration of the research process into wider context, i.e. in a network of further
actors: Because action research had a political agenda, the structures of power, hegemony, of exploitation and respective classes were part of it, and directly impacted on the processes. In fact, one objective was to make these impacts and influences explicit.

In participatory research, we have an organization, either a non-governmental, an international, or a national that follows own agendas and political priorities. In this context they organize projects. The own agenda, which is often influenced by national and international political relations and power structures, is neither made explicit, nor is it itself a matter of reflection in mutual cooperation with the target groups. In the participatory research these issues play a minor role or no role at all. The aim is to find more efficient and better ways to implement the project. Especially with regards to official development projects, the political context and framework is completely left out.

Here we have a telling asymmetry. The people who are the target group of the project are asked why they do what they do. What their rationalities are, how they see the world etc. However, the researcher is not asked why she/he is doing research, why it is funded etc. In other words, the objective of participatory research is to find out the relations into which the activities of the target people are integrated into, but not a self-reflection together with the target group.

Looking at these structural aspects, certain tensions are obvious.

1. **Asymmetries of involvement:** For the researcher the research or project is temporarily. Thus, the consequences of changed circumstances as a result of the project have to be coped with by the people. These might be positive, as f.e. clarified land ownership and access to resources, but they might as well be negative.

2. **Conscious raising and manipulation:** In formal terms, the target groups in participatory research are taken as “subjects”. The participatory setting allows them to raise their voice and articulate interests. For the people the method is something new, while the researchers are usually well versed in it. Furthermore, the researcher has already set the main topics, to which the people should respond.

3. **Degree of participation of different actors:** For pure research, the research funding organizations make the decision over the proposal. For development projects, the organisation decides in how far the project fits in their own policy priorities. Consequently, even the researcher has only a limited control over what should be researched, as only those projects, that are funded, which is decided upon by the organisation, can be implemented. As a result, even in participatory research, the design and agenda is set already.
These tensions and relations become more visible when looking at them as a network: The academic outcome is of little relevance within this network, as it is only of importance for the researcher. Interesting is the overlapping between all the organizational aspects like funding etc., and the research tasks (design), and that the researcher is closer to these organisations than to the project as well as the researched. Here the question can be raised in how far participatory research actually implies alienation.

Looking only at the stronger ties, some further aspects can be highlighted: The researcher is, of course, closely linked to the academic outcome, the organizations and the researched. So, the researcher makes the project possible and thereby connects the researched with the organisation. Interestingly, concerning the local consequences, these affect mainly the researched. As a conclusion, participatory research is primarily a means to gather data and make use of local knowledge and capacities. It does not, however, provide a real path for articulation of local demands.

Here certainly, action research with its explicit political agenda had a different focus.

3. Does participatory research empower the people?

As shown in the diagrams, the impact of the researched remains limited. Even in action research, the objectives, the agenda was, to a wide extend, and defined by the researcher. Because the control over the research process by the researched is reduced, the critique of participatory research as a means for manipulation has its validity. Certainly, examples, where participatory research was used as such a means to even enforce power structures are numerous. To give an example:

In one presentation it was argued that participatory research was very successful and that the people actually confirmed in the process the use and value of the planned project. Some slides were shown of the participatory sessions. The team of researchers, dressed in a formal way with pens and blocks were sitting at a table. In front of them, sitting in rows on the floor dressed in their best local clothes, were the participators. The whole setting reflected a situation in which government officials, what the researchers were, are telling the people what to do. This example shows clearly that the group does not necessarily provide better information than talks with individuals. As Leach points out, rituals express social relations and most of all power differentials. Participatory sessions often have such ritualistic dimensions and intransparente power-relations. Of course, now much has been written about the setting of participatory sessions, and the basic mistakes referred to here are not that often encountered. However, it is not only a question of proper techniques, but as much a question of attitude and recognition of the Other (see Taylor 1996; Honneth 1994).
Many examples like this mentioned above indicate an asymmetrical relation in much of participatory research. While the researcher is well informed and knows what to ask, the regular people have difficulties to understand what it is all about. As long as participation is demanded by the researcher, the asymmetric relations remain.

In terms of ethics, social scientists should be careful about participatory methods, as they easily imply forms of manipulation. Crucial, and this is not only relevant with regards to participatory methods, is that the respondents have to be taken serious and as recognised subjects with dignity, able to organize their lives. They are the experts of their practices. Another related question is the tension between affirmation and critique. In action research of the seventies, the critique of society was in the research process, combined to some degree with the affirmation of the researcher. He, as an avant-garde was sure to know better and that she/he was responsible to engender the seeds of critique among the peasants. One researcher once told to my colleague Rüdiger Korff that she received a very positive feedback from the people. The reason was, as she explained: “I feel that they appreciate to speak to someone who understands matters better then they do themselves. I can explain everything to them. Of course, I have a better education and a more developed conscious then they do. So, they can learn from my insights.” He kicked her out of his office.

4. Critical or affirmative? Means and ends:

Research methodologies are means to collect data. Thus, they are defined by ends that the researcher (or the organization) sets in the first place. However, when looking at the “tyranny of participation” (Cooke, Khotari, 2001) it seems that the ends have become means in their own rights. But, what kind of means? If the means are independent from the ends, they turn into ideologies, as a reflection over the ends is made impossible. They seemingly legitimate interventions by organizations. Just like “good governance” or “democracy” have become values in themselves, participation has become a must do in any development project. Reasons why are hardly given. Interestingly, in these circumstances it is usually not made explicit what meant by participation. Only when observing what is done, i.e. the practices of participation it is evident that participation is too often a means of manipulation. Commonly participation implies own involvement of those participating. It has, thus, a lot to do with a “common good”, owned by a collective. But, who is the collective, who is the owner? It turns out that the owner of this common good is its main producer: the organization. Turning into an end instead of a means, i.e. turning into an ideology implies that participatory research is a means for affirmation. In contrast, participation can and should be understood as involvement based on own interests. Then, however, it does not make sense to make “participatory session” where the people have to come to. There must be
channels for participation existing already, where the people can articulate their demands. These should not be based on benevolence, but rather on the consensus that participation in defining the future is a human right! Then, real participatory research is listening to what the people say, when they voice their views. Interestingly, the experts hardly ever participate in such participatory sessions. Nevertheless, participatory methods are very important for research, and they should be applied. However, it depends first of all on the ends why these means are used. This leads back to the question addressed already by HERBERT MARCUSE (1967) on whether one engages in affirmative or critical research. In other words, should our research affirm the given power structures, or should it point out that these can be changed? This question should not be confused with another as relevant questions. In the eighties the fashion was “participatory action research”. Are we condemned as conservative, when we say, what is needed is “good” research? The general principle of any science is, that its entire hypothesis has only temporal validity and social science is nothing without reflection and critique. If, science is not taken per se as the realm of specially educated scientists, but an issue of general relevance, then scientific inquiry, what is research, has to have such a critical element. Therefore, we demand “good” research, because if the requirements for good research are followed, then it is necessarily critical research. Of course, such an approach opposes the kind of mercenary activities usually referred to as “consultancy” scholars have to engage in to make a living.

Science and good research requires freedom. Only if this is guaranteed, participatory research can really make sense. As a conclusion, we scholars have to work together and cooperate. We are not the leaders of the people, but we are in an advantageous position. Thus, we should do our main job, which is enlightenment.

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