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# Research, Participation and Social Transformation: Notes on the Unfolding of a Research Practice\*

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The article presents the experiences of a research group in South Brazil. The main purpose is to describe and reflect upon the process developed by a group which, while following quite independent paths, encounters in participatory action research the methodological basis for carrying out different projects. There are presented and discussed five different projects: (1) participatory budgeting, which also marked the beginning of the group; (2) the work of artisans; (3) National Programme for Public Security and Citizenship; (4) pedagogical mediations in associated work; (5) evaluation research with an NGO engaged in popular education. The conclusions point to the importance of considering the interplay of the social, political and pedagogical dimensions within a research practice.

**Key words:** participatory action research, participatory budgeting, public policies, research group, social transformation

## Introduction

In this text we present a research practice of a group of researchers formed originally around the study of participatory budgeting in the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), between the years of 1999 and 2002. There are,

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therefore, two intertwined dimensions in this text: one of them refers to participatory budgeting as a process of popular participation which has, in itself, a highly investigative ingredient in as much the decision making process implies knowing the regional reality, the system of elaboration of the budget and the economic and financial situation of the place where the budget is discussed. The second dimension refers to the research movement developed by the group which, since then, developed participatory research processes in various other contexts.

First, there will be presented some characteristics of participatory budgeting as an instrument for public administration. There are today many initiatives of decentralisation of public budgeting carried out by administrations of different ideological matrices. In this text we will focus on participatory budgeting in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, which had some special features, such as a relatively high volume of resources to be allocated through this process, and its geographic and demographic scope. It was also the time when the group was organised on the basis of some common methodological and theoretical references, having participation and social transformation as points of convergence.

These epistemological and methodological options were woven into the movements of research, being as much the reflex of practices as they were mobilising forces for action. There will be presented some of the roads constructed during the research process, with the purpose of making explicit the relations between the research group and the communities, between the participants of the group itself, and, together with local administrators, the relations with the state administration. At the same time, we wanted to keep research as a space with its own specificity in this network in which knowledge is produced. In the tradition of participatory research, this collective production of knowledge requires mobilised subjects, being therefore also a pedagogical and formative process.

The third part of the study shows the unfolding of this research movement. There was a growth in scope and in depth. Our intention is to argue that participatory (action) research is part of the movements of society, being attentive to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004) calls the sociology of emergences. It is a way of capturing the innovative elements, those with

transformative potential, but also to “excavate” the absences, i.e., bringing to the light realities which were made invisible or silenced. There will be brief reports of four recent experiences developed by members of the research team, namely: (1) a co-operative of women; (2) policies of public security and citizenship; (3) an experience of associated work of solid waste recyclers; (4) the work of a centre of popular education in Curitiba.

In the final consideration we try to reflect on the learning in this collective process of investigation, having our attention directed to two dimensions. The first one of them is the impact of this form of research on the persons, groups and communities with whom the research is carried out. The second is related to the development of research in a dialogical process in which the group reorganises and reinvents itself.

### **Participatory budgeting: a researching participation**

The resistance to the military dictatorship (1964-1985), a process of democratisation which extended for over a decade, and the discussion and elaboration of a new Constitution from 1986 to 1988, make up the political framework in which emerged social movements which had a strong impact on Brazilian society. Some of these movements were of the classical type, such as trade unions which wanted the independence of the unions from the state and patronage, as much in the cities as on the land, or the township association (*associações de bairro*) which struggled for specific public policies as asphalt on the streets, the construction of schools, transit regulation, kindergardens, health facilities, etc. Other movements organised themselves less around common issues, and more around affinities with values, causes or demands; these were the so-called new social movements, as the movements for human rights, ecology, feminism and free sexual expression, among many others.

Among the common characteristics of these movements were their highly mobilising potential, the plurality of worldviews, their politicisation and the creation of networks of members and supporters expressing solidarity. To a certain extent, a common feature of these movements was the limit of the political mediation of the classical political institutions: there was a great disproportion between the expectation and demand on one side, and the

eventual social changes which actually resulted from the mobilisation. This incapacity of existing institutions to correspond to what the movements considered their rights as citizens led the social movements in Brazil to keep looking for more spaces for participation in the formulation of policies and in the administration of the state through alternative channels and not through classical systems of representation. The constitutional provision for a great diversity of counsels in specific areas of public policies and of direct participation as a right of citizenship resulted from these struggles.

In Porto Alegre, where specially the township associations and the ecological movement had strong expression at the end of the 1980s, the struggle gradually grew for effective participation of the social movements in the definition and implementation of the city's budget. From the acceptance of this demand at municipal level (1990) and state level (1999-2002) the participatory budget resulted. This form of budgeting started as an informal consultation by the municipal administration of the population in different regions of the city about their suggestions and priorities for public investment; gradually this process grew in scope and revealed its potential for political learning and also for the legitimisation of public policies, and, by extension, of public administrators. Basically for the latter perception, the initiative was appropriated by the Workers' Party as a way of governing. Even now that this specific form of participation on the elaboration and control of the public budget is pushed to the periphery of the public agenda, it continues to be an object of political dispute.

It will not be possible to reconstruct here the constitution of this form of planning and controlling the public budget, nor the political disputes around it. The purpose is to present briefly how our group developed this research process on the state level. First, however, let us point out some of the possibilities and limits of participatory budgeting.

According to Brazilian legislation, the public budget is made up of a set of laws proposed by the executive power. At the beginning of the term a four year plan is elaborated and sent to the parliament, and guidelines are also developed, every year, for the annual budget. Once approved by the parliament, it is then the prerogative of the executive power to prepare the budget project as such, which is then submitted to the parliament. There is a rather

small margin of possibilities for representatives to exert influence in terms of expenditures, revenue or investments. There is a long tradition in Brazil which allows the governing parties to view the budget as a sort of declaration of intentions, especially in terms of investments. More articulated sectors of society use these procedures to insert their priorities, frequently through lobbies and political pressure.

Participatory budgeting was an attempt to promote a direct consultation of the population, prior to the elaboration of the budget. There was no legal provision for this consultation, and its legitimacy and strength depended very much on the commitment of the governors to effectively respect the priorities indicated, including them in the budget, or transforming them later in public policies. The great acceptance of participatory budgeting was fundamentally due to an informal commitment of the administration, and some later electoral defeats of the Workers' Party, especially in municipalities, are due to the rupture of this commitment. In spite of the difficulties, there were relevant advances in terms of developing a democratic consciousness.

First, people who had very little or no interest at all in the political life and administration of the city or the state perceived that they could become agents in defining the destiny of their collectivity. They started to think in political categories, to pay attention and understand how the priorities in public investments and expenditures are defined, and what implications this has for everyone. It was an impressive political learning experience. This implication is at the center of our attentions. Another implication, not less important for democracy, but which cannot be discussed in this context, is that the historical practice of pressure, and the priority of investments for sectors able to promote their lobbies, were greatly subverted. Through participatory budgeting, citizens, many of them before politically marginalized, promoted significant changes in the priorities of investments and expenditures.

On the other hand, there were also perverse effects in the implementation of participatory budgeting, which in Porto Alegre are quite visible. As much for the possibility of direct individualised participation in planning the public policies in Porto Alegre as for the ostensive symbolic appropriation of participatory budgeting as a landmark of one political party, many social move-

ments were demobilised. This demobilisation cannot be attributed exclusively to these two factors, but they gave this conquest a flavor of a Pyrrhic victory.

### **“You make the way by walking” – the emerging of themes**

The years between 1999 to 2002 correspond to the creation of a research group which was interested in knowing and, more than this, in getting involved in this experiment of popular participation. The research movement involved students around the theme of citizenship and participation. The visits to different regions, observing and participating in participatory budgeting in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, promoted the emergence of different thematic options which were developed afterwards. One of them, as an example, was the mode of participation of women during the assemblies of participatory budgeting.

What we observed at this moment were invisibilities, and distinct ways of breaking up with a traditional mode of participation by women. Especially teachers from elementary school had a significant role in the political pedagogical involvement of schools in the assemblies. They usually appeared in the assemblies in their classical tasks, i.e., in the work of support and preparation of the beginning of the meetings. Most speeches were masculine and, when at the end there was a manifestation of a woman, she would very likely start apologising or saying “I just wanted to say...” This “just”, however, many times referred to issues of vital importance for the community, such as water, school transportation, agro-ecology, etc. We observed also that their way of speaking in public indicated ways of calling attention for certain political articulations which they undertook with the community. In this sense, we were able to perceive how the theme of the invisibilities, and the way less articulated groups in terms of rhetoric make themselves present in such spaces.

This analysis has not been fully developed, and should be continued. What we want to emphasise in this brief memory of “the road that is made while walking” is that the theme of invisibility of women was understood as constitutive for the history of women. Beginning from this first research experience with the group, projects developed in other spaces, attempting to

contribute to the understanding of the pedagogies of non-formal educational spaces produced by women. This is especially true for women of popular classes with their precarious work at the margins, their attempts to return to study, and to participate in daily political life.

### **The pedagogies of the margins by artisans<sup>1</sup>**

The invisibilities of women, produced along the history of mankind require cleverness and stubbornness to be reverted and turned visible (and thus recognised!). In this sense, it turns out that in the field of education there is experimentation with different modes of studying educational processes. In our group, at this moment, we have dealt with the theme of artisanal work, more precisely the modes of teaching and learning how to weave, to embroider, to make crochet and to sew, in the process of producing the regional *gaucho* workmanship. These are non-formal spaces where women are taught, even if it is to perform the non-visible work of women.

We perceived, through observant participation, individual and collective interviews (discussion groups and circles of conversation) that women turn (learn to be) themselves in artisans, because they need to complement the family's income. They learn while they work together with the more experienced artisans, who already know and have spent more time in these places of work. This non-formal education is observed in groups that work with embroidery in the mountainous region near Porto Alegre, groups that work with crochet in the seaport city of Rio Grande, with sewing in Pelotas and with weaving in the Metropolitan area of Porto Alegre.<sup>2</sup>

The learning we observed and analysed up to now is the basis for thinking through the pedagogies which take place in these non-school educational settings. The perception of the precariousness, and above all the *doing-thinking* (Sennett 2009) which establishes links with the participant artisans

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<sup>1</sup> This project is co-ordinated by Edla Eggert.

<sup>2</sup> The cities referred in this paragraph are located in Rio Grande do Sul, the southern state in Brazil.



in this study, are learning and knowledge which we understand as being produced at non-formal contexts.

In our study we got involved, through participant observation, in the daily life of the ateliers. These were extremely rich moments, so that we could, later, write about the sharing which we experienced there. While we developed the research and were at the beginning “the strangers” in the groups, the artisans welcomed and taught us, and we also taught them. We were, in reality, experimenting in practice the writings of Paulo Freire (1992) that there is no bigger or better knowledge, but that we know different things. That is, we became mixed with the group and started a distinct cycle of relationship with the group. We do not know exactly what to do with this experience, but it is gratifying to perceive the complicity which we do not want to lose with the groups. The question is if this means not being scientific, or if this could be another way of doing science. We also ask ourselves about how much we are permeated by the experience of popular education, of the popular culture circles, the circles of conversation, the feminist movement which insists in bringing the knowledge from the margins to the academy.

We realised that both the methodologies of popular education, respectively of participatory research, and the feminist movement offer alternative ways of collecting and analysing data. We observed that there are ways of doing research which are able to develop dialogue. In this process, in our insertion with the weaving atelier in the Porto Alegre metropolitan area, we were constantly challenged to return to the group in order to discuss what we were observing in our visits.

One of the questions which we used to make to the artisans, and we made this question based on our hypothesis, was about the weaving techniques which were made invisible. In other words, how they learned to do what they did, and how they would explain it to us. The answers we would hear mostly were that they did not know to tell us how they learned it, but that they were just able to do it. Inspired in a passage from Paulo Freire in *Pedagogia da Esperança* [Pedagogy of hope] (1992, p. 46-50) where he plays a game in which he asks questions about things the Chilean peasants don't know, and they in return ask questions about things he doesn't know, we decided to ask the women from the co-operative to teach us how to weave. Then, in 2010,

we had a two day workshop where the group from the university learned how to weave, and the weavers learned how to teach and explain what and how they do it. This experience was registered and provided the basis for further dialogue.

It is in this way that we understand the construction of methodological approaches which filter educative principles associated with popular education with feminist principles, i.e., to foster the empowerment of women experiences, especially of poor women. It is through the making visible and recognition of the margins as a place for theorising that, using dialogical practices, we engaged popular education and gender studies to produce participatory research.

### **National Program for Public Security and Citizenship<sup>3</sup>**

In the specialised literature, and in our own research about participatory budgeting, a widening of political participation and a multiplication of issues that the participants understood as their rights were evidenced. But it also became clear that segments of the population were not mobilised for this initiative and remained apparently indifferent to politics and political discussions in the public sphere. They remained almost invisible to the public arena.

Therefore, one of the further developments of our research on participatory budgeting was provoked by the question about citizenship and about how citizens recognize or ignore each other in their political community. Given the fact that this form of budgeting was not more practiced in the region, we looked for another public policy that might shed light on the issues we were still concerned with. That is how the National Programme for Public Security and Citizenship (Pronasci) became a field of research and dialogue with the theoretical concerns.

This policy gathers training programmes, income supplementation and management of local conflicts, among other initiatives such as public safety improvement, focused on areas that concentrate poverty and high rates of

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<sup>3</sup> This project is coordinated by Emil Sobottka.

violence. One of these programs is the Women for Peace Programme. Women without income attend to regular courses and are prepared to work in their communities, especially among youth, in order to ostensibly promote peace. As a reward they receive a monthly subsidy (approx. 80 Euros).

The research consists in accompanying these women during their training courses, and in their everyday activities in the community. Besides attending classes and observing the activities, some women are invited to talk about their dreams and to tell about their life trajectories, especially their experiences of disrespect and injustice.

Although it is still early to bring solid results, being with these women has already revealed some interesting facts. Most women feel themselves very valued/honoured by the inclusion in this policy and become increasingly recognized as local leaders. The process revealed also that the state has imposed a more strict control over areas where this policy is implemented. Although there are specific policies for security officers, police violence and arbitrariness are still high. A third observation we made: in meetings with youth, their disenchantment and lack of prospects became very evident. Until about the 13rd. year there is still much optimism, but then a very clear shift occurs on their expectations, and there prevails a strong pessimism about their own future.

The relationship with the people responsible for policy implementation as well as accompanying the training activities showed us how difficult it is for operators of public policy to bring their cognitive and evaluative horizons close to the target population. Small examples may illustrate this.

1. In a certain community, one ONG with a very high reputation is responsible for the implementation of the women programme and directs also a lot of other activities. Officials of the organisation intensively monitor the Women of Peace of that community, to the point that they require to be consulted before any contact with third parties is accepted. We witnessed a situation in which even women not participating in the Women for Peace were banned from reporting on their life experiences because these interviews, supposed to occur on a public place in the township on a weekend, were not "authorised" by them.

2. To speak about child labor in a training course, the teacher introduces the subject with an experience. She told how, while on vacation at the beach in Porto Seguro, Bahia, she saw a child having to help the mother sell food to tourists. Many of the mothers present to the course have or had family members who, as children and young people, worked to support their family, including drug trafficking, the largest "employer" of these communities. It would not be necessary to speak of the distant and inaccessible beach to introduce such issue.
3. Another revealing scene. A teacher begins the lesson by saying that today there is toilet paper in the bathroom, because she had brought it from home. Given the reaction of one woman who said that there is always toilet paper there, the teacher replies, "Oh, but I brought the X mark, which is much softer!" There was a strong reactions after the class, stressing that rough toilet paper also is toilet paper.

One of the research goals is to detect potentials of moral outrage and mobilisation for resistance against injustice and disrespect in everyday inter-subjective relations, in the sense described by the theory of recognition. Among the surprises we have so far is the discovery of an acute awareness of injustice, of disrespect, and of the denial of basic rights. But this perception does not activate the surplus of validity of shared ethical convictions. There is little expression of outrage and virtually no mobilisation and struggle against these experiences.

Unlike the groups that found expression in social movements and in the participatory budgeting process, among the recipients of this policy there has not been found a catalyst that would initiate a reaction.

### **Pedagogical mediations in associated work<sup>4</sup>**

We understand participatory research as having originated within the struggle for social transformation, articulated with popular education, which since the 1950's assumed a political and mobilising character. Although different, this

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<sup>4</sup> This project was conducted by Telmo Adams.

emancipatory character is still present today, maybe in a less pretentious and humble (with less certainties) way, in a more complex world. Participatory research shares with qualitative social research, anchored on a dialectical-hermeneutical method, the assumption that the researcher is always “situated”, and that the production of knowledge, through the reflection of practice, depends on the place he/she occupies

How did we come to articulate popular education with participatory research? The starting point was exactly one of the main features of popular education: to start from the conditions and necessities of those being educated and potential partners in research. Given the need for an educational programme with the group, it was proposed to establish explicitly this relation between popular education and participatory research. The dialogue with the group made possible a methodological reconstruction articulating investigative and educational processes.

Considering individual and collective experience of twenty solid waste recyclers of the association, in a town about 50 km away from Porto Alegre (Dois Irmãos), the project articulated research, systematisation of the process, sharing of knowledge, collective (re)construction of new knowledge and publicisation. The road we followed was to allow everybody to take part in “the production of knowledge that makes sense for them, that they commit themselves within a project of knowing that institutes them as subjects” (Josso 1999: 16). This pedagogical character of participatory research and the investigative dimension of education has been widely acknowledged in Latin America (Brandão/Streck 2006).

From the beginning it was assumed that the subjects had autonomy to express their difficulties in daily associated work.<sup>5</sup> The proposal of participatory research was gradually constructed in the encounters with the group, where a variety of techniques associated with popular education were used. Such process allowed the spontaneous expression of the subjects about different aspects of the life of the group, besides guaranteeing a rich space for observing the power and knowledge relations established among the recyclers

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<sup>5</sup> The relation of mutual trust was established basically through the elaboration of a little book which tells the 10 years of existence of the association.

and with the researcher. In the dialogue between education and investigative “listening”, it was possible to perceive the implications related to their conscious and unconscious interests.

In short, the steps taken in the methodological movement, and which in our opinion validated the results, were as follow:

1. Observations and dialogue for recognizing the field to be studied.
2. Collective discussion and definition of “generative themes”.
3. Data gathering and search for new information with the use of a diversity of instruments of data collection.
4. Individual interviews with all workers considering: time as member of the association, gender, age, level of responsibility in the administration of the co-operative.
5. Group discussions.
6. Regular registration in a field diary, systematisation of encounters with the group, feedback at the next encounter for eventual revisions.
7. Organization of information according to “strong ideas” (categories) and levels of interest in the thematic axis, dimensions or indicators which started to appear.
8. Analysis of the pedagogical mediations which were being shaped in the activities and educational encounters, elaboration of a video, participation in seminars, workshops of systematisation, elaboration of articles, discussion of issues in the perspective of construction of bylaws, discussion group with members of the external community, representation in forums, etc.
9. Regular discussion of the results through the preparation of a chart containing possible pedagogical mediations
10. Evaluation of the research process as preparation for the seminar on “research, participation and social transformation” (Unisinos 2006).

11. Publication of a booklet that systematised the process and would serve as support for other similar experiences.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis was marked by the dialectical relation between field information, theory, dialogue with the subjects, and interaction with other research and systematisation processes. There was instituted an interactive dynamics of understanding based on qualitative indicators, “as a systematic mode of comparison.”(Bauer 2004: 199). The priority to the educative process, while involving the subjects in a research process, made it possible to objectify the felt needs, but also to identify real needs not felt (Gutiérrez 1999). Thus, it was assumed that, by involving the subjects in the reflection on the generative themes, they would also incorporate the objectives of research as means of individual and collective education.

It is important to mention that the formative encounters opened the way for perceiving the singularity of the relation of the knowledge of each one of the associates. The circumstances of daily life were filled with learning useful in the research process. We experienced that when the “investigative attitude” takes over, then at any moment new discoveries can be made. Such process does not exempt the researcher from dealing with the natural interference of emotions in the apprehension of information Nevertheless, objectification in writing was able to throw light on some important aspects.

Participatory research in its relation to popular education challenges us as researchers-educators to adapt the methodology and techniques of data collection and interpretation to circumstances, but being attentive to guaranteeing the essential principles of participation and emancipation affirmed both by popular education and participatory research.

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<sup>6</sup> This booklet was the product of the collective process developed in the encounters about generating themes, which were privileged moments for observation, and dialogue with the research participants. The official presentation of this material happened on the day of the public defense of the dissertation.

### **An experience of evaluation research<sup>7</sup>**

The process of evaluation-research with the Centro de Formação Urbano Rural Irmã Araújo (CEFURIA), in Curitiba, began in 2009, when the research group *Pedagogical mediations and citizenship* organised a seminar on “Popular education in Latin America in the context of structural and cultural changes (1989-2009)”.<sup>8</sup> At this time, the research group had already developed a broad research process about historical sources of Latin American pedagogical thought, while being in dialogue with various centres of popular education. The purpose was to contribute to theoretical constructions in Latin America, from the perspective of participatory and transformative educational practice.

In this seminar it was possible to establish a dialogue about participatory methods in research and experiences of systematisation based on inputs from the historical developments, as well as from present practices developed by NGOs and social movements which participated in the seminar. Among these NGOs was CEFURIA, whose co-ordinator expressed interest in evaluating its educative process motivated by the demand of external agencies, as well as by its own needs to analyse its practices and perspectives. A timetable was then developed which contemplated as much the intended evaluation as our research interests. In this process the participation of everyone was valued, from the founders of CEFURIA to the educators involved in the various action fields of CEFURIA.

An important step in this process of evaluation research was the preparatory workshop. It was the moment when generating themes were identified which would serve as reference for the next stages of research, at the University in São Leopoldo (Rio Grande do Sul) and at CEFURIA in Curitiba

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<sup>7</sup> The project was co-ordinated by Danilo Streck and Telmo Adams. Special mention to the collaboration of Cheron Zanini Moretti, Leticia da Silva, Mirele Alberton and Jonas Hendler da Paz, Andressa Spindola and Vinicius Masseroni.

<sup>8</sup> In this Project there was active participation of representatives and educators from NGOs and social movements, graduate and undergraduate students, professors/researchers and public administrators.



(Paraná). There was an invitation to the participatory process and the subjects prepared themselves through readings about action and participatory research, as well as preparatory meetings for the utilisation of research instruments.

During nine months many interviews were carried out, as well as “conversation circles”, focus groups, and a specific seminar for debating the preliminary results and the process of the research project. At these moments we discussed various themes, among them the relations within the group, with the communities and agencies, and the construction of popular power within social practices. We also consulted documents, booklets, and other material in CEFURIA’s library. All these instruments contributed to the elaboration of indicators of social emancipation and to the evaluation of the experience of CEFURIA.

The research process allowed us to perceive some different understandings of the task of CEFURIA. For the older members this experience had to do with Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs), the militant trade unions or the popular social movements, which means that their understanding is based on the experience of the constitution of the NGO. For the younger generation of participants, the centre opened the possibility for alternative readings of reality. Persons related to universities see CEFURIA as a qualified and differentiated space which serves as entrance door to establish contacts with social movements and popular organisations.

The participants of the School of Social Economy (*Escolinha de Economia Solidária*), for example, had their self-esteem strengthened, were able to get a historical and contextual understanding of the work market and to envisage new possibilities. The words of a man who collects solid waste for recycling on the streets exemplifies this: “At the beginning I was ashamed of what we are doing, but we are learning our rights; an individual ‘carrinhoiro’ (one who pushes a two wheel little cart) does not know that he has rights, and ends giving up the product for an ‘atravessador’” (an intermediary business man). If, on one hand, formal jobs are difficult to find, on the other hand the engagement in initiatives of generation of income implies the self-valorisation as persons who have the right to work and the recognition as historical agents. As an interviewer from a bakery pointed out: “Here we

always have vacancies”, which confronts the common “no vacancies” which makes part of so many life histories of persons who participate in projects related to CEFURIA.

The constant reference to “feeling well in the group” probably has to do with the preservation of the “familiar climate”. The mutual support is expressed in the experience of these groups, an example of this being the emphasis on the group as a place to improve their health, mainly for women. The expressions of solidarity also influence the search for alphabetisation. The changes produced affect as well the gender relations at home and at the work place.

No uniformity can be seen in the relation of groups and projects with their respective communities. An example of this is the *carrinheiros* who receive support from some members of the community, and are discriminated against by others. Another example is the bakeries, mainly hosted in spaces from parishes, whose acceptance varies from support to being tolerated.

CEFURIA has been reference for many partner organisations and social movements. It entails a good portion of the history of the organisations for popular struggles in Paraná, especially in Curitiba, being a qualified space for articulating projects and ideas. It seems, according to the collective analysis, that CEFURIA should not be seen as an umbrella organisation nor a vanguard, but a reference space to confront the realities of fragmentation felt in urban areas.

This research process was extremely rich for the variety of research experiences it entailed. There was direct dialogue with the groups at the periphery of the city, such as co-operatives of solid waste collectors, bakeries and exchange clubs. These groups, on their turn, had the possibility to discuss their own situation in circles of evaluation, the result being then systematised. There were meetings with counsellors, with university professors and students related to CEFURIA. More important, everybody felt an active participant in identifying perspectives for CEFURIA’s present actions and its future. The previous negotiation of a detailed plan of action was decisive, with the discussion of the research methodology and the regular dialogue about the process and the results.

### **Some considerations on the process**

The above described processes are marked at the same time by unity and diversity. We understand this to be intrinsic to participatory research. The unity can be found in some basic principles which seem to apply to the four cases briefly presented: trusting the other as a companion in knowing; understanding research as a way of pronouncing (understanding and acting upon) one's world; knowledge as having an instrumental character and thus being part of a worldview and social and political projects.

The diversity refers to the background and specific interests of the members of the research team which are here represented, and the different situations and social contexts. This leads us to see at every moment the complexities of social processes, which are probably related to the low effectiveness of traditional social research for improving real living conditions. How can we relate the growing need for specialisation in all spheres of life with the need for dialogue and integration of perspectives? The fact of functioning as a group, although quite loosely and with distinct individual focus, challenges us to be open to other possibilities of perceiving and understanding.

The practice of the research group reveals distinct modes or levels of participation as well. Some experiences have a rather deep level of involvement with the group: as stated in the case of women co-operative, of complicity. Others see participation not so much in terms of the subject involved, but in terms of the research process itself being participant in the process of developing citizenship and of emancipation. Also the practice of dialogue is different depending on the scale of the field (for example an atelier and a large city), on the geographical distance and other conditions. These are issues to be further explored by the group.

Although not developed in this paper, the research practices described are an expression of the multifaceted theoretical background encompassed in participatory research. It seems that since its beginning, to use an expression from the teaching of liberation theology, orthopraxis has priority over orthodoxy. There is also a healthy degree of epistemological anarchy (Roberto Follari) or theoretical promiscuity (Peter Reason). The solution to social problems will probably not be found in a choice between one author or another, but by the resourceful openness to listen to those involved. By

resourceful listening we understand theoretical and technical competency as well as ethical commitment with a society in which everyone has place (Zapatistas) and with the being more (Paulo Freire) of everyone.

Finally, our experience seems to strengthen the argument that participatory (action) research is at the same time a social, a political and a pedagogical practice. It is a social practice, since it is part of the movement of society, and as such is marked by the provisional character of human action. It is a political practice, since the production of knowledge occurs within a context of power disputes, which require taking sides. Participatory research is a pedagogical practice, in as much as it is based on interpersonal relations of persons who, together, intend to understand and transform their reality.

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