Research and Social Transformation: Notes about Method and Methodology in Participatory Research
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This text is a contribution to methodological reflection on research, based on the experience of a research team who explored various aspects of the participatory budget in the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil). It is situated within the context of participatory research, and deals with the following topics: method and methodology: the insertion of research and education within the same process of knowing; research and its ethical and political commitment; research as public action directed towards the constitution of the public sphere. The intense interaction in the research process, attending to the assemblies of the participatory budget in various municipalities, being present at council meetings, talking to communities and community leaders as well as participating in academic circles, contributed to understanding research as integrated within the movement of knowledge, values, cultures, worldviews, and above all, people towards the achievement of their goals.

Key words: participatory research, socio-political commitment, method, public

Introduction

Whoever engages in research knows that at some time, and in a variety of ways, he or she will have to compose the *corpus* of the data from which to extract or reconstruct the meanings which will roughly correspond to the re-

sult of his or her project. They are notes in the form of graphics, field diaries, videos, interviews, besides images and gestures that have simply been registered in the researcher's memory. This process, as will be argued here, is an act, and a way of describing the world. In this text there are some reflections on the process, as an attempt to contribute to the reflection on method and methodology, based on participatory principles and practices.

Some preliminary notes are necessary to situate the considerations that follow. The project, which is frequently referred to, had as its objective the study of the pedagogical dimensions of participatory processes in South Brazil, especially those related to the participatory budget.[1] This political and administrative practice began in Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul) in 1989, and has challenged the imagination of public office holders and social movements who are interested in fostering people's participation in matters regarding their cities. In Brazil alone (Avritzer/Navarro 2003: 14) there are over 100 experiments with this methodology for developing the budget, and all over the world one learns of initiatives to overcome the well known deficiencies of representative democracy. (Santos 2003).

In spite of many differences, there is usually a set of principles which permeate the experiences of participatory budget. The basic assumption is the search for a new balance between representative and direct or participative democracy. In this sense, participatory budget is a tool for social change based on an active citizenship; it is a "school" where citizens learn about the role of government, the local and national policies and their own rights and duties as citizens. Participatory budget is also an innovative democratic institution, as different social agents come to interact on what is the core element of public planning, i.e., the public budget. The process can also be defined as a public policy, in the sense that it radically transforms the traditional understanding of planning, and especially the development of the public budget in Brazil, dominated by a reduced group of technicians together with politicians who currently occupy power positions. At its origins there was an explicit

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[1]   The project was partially sponsored by the National Agency for Research in Brazil (Conselho Nacional de Pesquisa CNPq).

purpose of redefining priorities, and redirecting investments towards marginalized social classes and groups. (Fedozzi 1999).

Within the research team, the issue has been looked at from various perspectives. From the point of view of political sciences, there is the question of the legality and legitimacy of procedures of direct popular involvement, sometimes conflicting with the established practices and even legal arrangements of representative democracy. Women have been asking about their place and role in the process, pointing out, for example, that it could not be mere coincidence that they tend to be very active at the base level discussions, while when it comes to representation they are rather absent. From a socio-pedagogical point of view it has been asked if the experience, even when discontinued, is able to form the *political capital* able to transfer the leanings in the participatory budget to other institutions, social movements or groups. Another sub-project analyses the participatory budget as a place for the emergence of leaders, eventually with some characteristics able to change the traditional client oriented and patriarchal type of leadership.

Due to this collective process it was possible to encompass a variety of investigative and formative activities. Through the permanent dialogue, new possibilities were created. The university[2] which hosted the project acquired rich archives of materials from the participatory budget in the State of Rio Grande do Sul from 1999 to 2002.[3] A cycle of studies with scholars from different fields of knowledge broadened the scope of the analysis. Besides individual field work, the group carried out seminars in selected towns, to discuss the results of the study and collect new data.

An important stage in this process was a seminar involving researchers from various groups, members of communities where researchers work and public office holders on the theme "Research, Participation, and Social Transformation". The intention was to listen to communities engaged in research projects, identifying whether the presence of researchers and the par-

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[2] Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos – Unisinos, situated in the Porto Alegre metropolitan area.

[3] These archives include booklets prepared for the assemblies in the 25 regions into which the state of Rio Grande do Sul was divided for the process as well as documents from counsel meetings and decisions.

ticipation in research projects makes a difference in the life of this community. The following extract from the contribution of the Secretary for Education in Barão, a small town about 100 km away from Porto Alegre, confirms the relevance of participation as a methodological principle, and as essential for research as a social practice. For him, research represents an addition for the community:

> The first thing that adds much in the process of participation is the opportunity of having another look at what we are doing. We are in the eye of the hurricane: the secretary of education, the secretary of agriculture, the mayor, let us say all the persons that are leading the process of participatory budget. Maybe we are not able to see our work, as it happens with the perspective of the researcher. When he participates in meetings he brings another viewpoint. And I think his or her theoretical base is very important, exactly to raise questions about our work.

This public office holder was telling us that as important as the final result of the research project was the actual presence of the researcher, introducing questions and issues able to bring about changes in the process. There are, as we noticed in the collective practice, different degrees and modalities of participation, but something seems to happen whenever persons understand themselves as agents in the process of pronouncing their world.

Methodology and the public dimension of research

Questions about research methodology tend to occupy a very important space in the research agenda. So much that every masters' or doctoral dissertation would not be complete without a chapter dealing with the issue of method. The many references to the paradigmatic crisis have in common the merit of provoking a reflection about the paths that lead to the respective conclusions, as well on the instruments used in the process. There are countless discussions about the epistemological presuppositions of research and researchers, and research apprentices may have never been so challenged in their certainties. No doubt, there is a very positive aspect to this inflection on the researcher, his and her believes, and his and her way of approaching reality. It is also positive that one has to recognize that there are no secure recipes, echoing the so often cited verses of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado:

Caminante no hay camino/ Se hace camino al andar". It is possible, as pointed out by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2000: 50) that it is indeed a symptom that we are in the midst of a paradigmatic change, when epistemological and methodological issues acquire a very special significance.

However, when this search for methodology becomes almost an obsession it is important that we give attention to some warning signals. First of all, there is the risk that this discussion revolves around itself, in never ending circles. In the case of education, where this research project is situated, what are the differences that studies in this field promote in pedagogical practices and educational policies? It can be argued that every project has its relevance, and it should also be considered that it is not possible to evaluate the results in a linear or immediate perspective. In this sense, every project will contribute to the accumulation of knowledge which at given time may allow acting on reality or prepare the way for further studies. This, however, should not deviate from the warning signals which are given by the reality of the country's classrooms and overall centuries' old problems in education. The warning signal challenges us to have an eye on the social significance of research, paying attention to the political strategies of the investigative work. In other words, in research there is the risk of *methodologization* (Mejía y Awad 2003: 145),[4] which consists in believing that the correct use of certain techniques, or an adequate methodological design, suffices to find solutions to the problems, sometimes diverting attention from the search for the most relevant questions from the social and human point of view.

Another warning signal is the closing out of the other, the different. Paradoxically the need to confront fundamental problems about truth does not have the same effect of provoking the same dose of humility among researchers. It is not rare that behind the so called provisory certainties there are hidden intransigencies which turn any dialogue impossible. There are then groups formed, which self-legitimize their discourses. Master and doctoral

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[4] The authors refer to the almost exclusive attention given to methodology in popular education leading to a theoretical weakness in the field and eventually to a discussion about redefining its foundations.

students are advised according to established references, many times being induced to simply repeating theories.

Besides, efforts of interdisciplinary practices encounter obstacles from a system of evaluation which inhibits innovations. It starts with the compartmentalization of researchers in quite closed graduate programmes and, within these programmes, in research lines. The time pressure to conclude the programmes usually in very precarious situations puts Brazilian students and researchers alike in narrow paths, so that in the name of productivity the soul may be lost, i.e., the proper capacity to ask relevant questions and search for answers with adequate knowledge background and autonomy. In a society which has transformed almost everything in measures and indicators of productivity, this may be considered progress. The warning signal, however, challenges us to think if, in the long run, this does not represent an impoverishment for the researcher and for research.

Once these warning signals are recognized as potential difficulties, there will also appear signals which will help to look for alternatives. These will probably not be found in a given theory, but in the delimitation of some spaces that can constitute a ground where to meet. This is not simply in view of a type of knowledge which supposedly should be preserved or advanced as a value in itself, but in the view of projects of life and society regarded as relevant. The pronouncing of the world is a public act. By promoting the interaction in many and different places of society (authorities, community leaders, teachers and students as well as a variety of groups) it was possible to experience this public character of research.

The encounter with the obvious

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Paulo Freire (1981: 87) comments that no oppressive system would survive if the oppressed started to ask this simple question: "Why?" Freire regarded himself as a *pilgrim of the obvious,* because he knew that he was talking and writing about simple things, nevertheless fundamental ones. What is more obvious then to teach and to learn? And what is more difficult? José Martí (1992: 288) wrote that the great truths, those who help us to live and to be happy, fit in the wings of a hummingbird.

It is a fact that the world has become complex, or that complexity has been recognized as a feature of the world, but we also can see how Edgar Morin, the great theorist of complexity, manages to be extremely simple in his thinking. What is more simple – in the sense of an aesthetic experience – than the idea that we should understand ourselves as navigating through the universe as a unique "community of destiny"(Morin 2000: 113)? And what is more difficult?

Where is this simplicity in research? One could say that one of the basic aims of research is to read and to pronounce the world.[5] Iria Charão (2005), co-ordinator of the participatory budget in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, said in an interview that sometimes people say things that we have difficulties in understanding, because they are so simple. The secret of research may be in penetrating this simplicity, to move inside, within its cracks and saliencies. This simplicity and this "obvious" does not meet us at the desk, protected among books, behind the computer screen. The obvious meets us in the streets, in the classroom, in conversations, always when we are ready for a type of listening in which we let go our defences and barriers, and abandon the position of those who already know or who imagine that their role is to make each piece of reality and of experience fit into a given schema or to put a tag on them. We might be overwhelmed by the fact that we live in quite a magic world, by finding out how little we know about the things that surround us, starting with the variety of plants that grow in our gardens to the computer we use in our daily work; or to what happens after all when we succeed in teaching and learning.

Research as reading and pronouncing the world starts with being open to the world. In this sense, research finds its place among many other ways of reading and pronouncing the world. This does not mean that the researcher is irrelevant or less important. Within this understanding of the investigative process, the researcher is irreplaceable in terms of the exemplarity of his posture in front of (and with) the other and the world. Research has to do as

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[5]   Both concepts – to read and to pronounce – are taken from Paulo Freire. According to this educator , the reading of the world precedes the reading of the word. This word, on its turn, has a dynamic dimension to it, in the sense that reading the word and saying one's word is to change the world.

much with the correct use of techniques as with the capacity of listening; a dense, intense and (im)patient listening. The use of techniques makes sense only within this attitude qualified by Paulo Freire as *epistemological curiosity.* Otherwise the technical competency runs the risk of contributing to the increase of human suffering and misery.

Research in action

Although there has never been a preoccupation in terms of framing the research process within a specific methodological approach, during the activities the proximity of what is known as participatory research became more and more evident. Participatory research developed in Latin America in the second half of the past century in connection with the movement of popular culture and of popular education. A basic reference in this research procedure is Orlando Fals Borda (2005) who proposed that real transformation of oppressive situations in Latin America could come about only with an alternative science: a science that would take its start from the actual knowledge in popular culture and address the situation of the people. Due to this radical view he left the university for 18 years as a protest against the inoperative routines of academic research.

Carlos Rodrigues Brandão (2005: 56) summarizes the principles, proposals and practices of participatory research in seven "convergent signs", as follows:

a) The different proposals and experiences appear more or less at the same time between the 1960s and 1980s, in few places on the Continent, but they were soon disseminated all over.

b) They originate within different social action units that act preferentially with popular groups or popular communities.

c) Most of them will be put into practice in emerging *popular social movements*, or acknowledge that they themselves are at the service of such *movements*.

d) They inherit and rework different theoretical fundamentals and diverse styles of construction of models for social knowledge by means

of scientific research. Actually, there is no single model or scientific methodology specific to all approaches of *participatory research.*

e) Acknowledging themselves as alternatives for projects of interlinking and mutual commitment of social actions with a popular vocation, always involving "erudite" (…) and "popular" (…) persons and social agencies, they begin with different possibilities of relationships between the two poles of social actors involved, both of them interactive and participants.

f) *Participatory research* studies assign to the popular agents different positions in the management of spheres of power during the research process as well as in the management of the social action processes (…)

g) As a rule, the different alternatives of participant research appear during intervals between the theoretical and methodological contribution from Europe and the United States, and the creation or original recreation of African, Asian and Latin American systems of thinking and social practices.

In what follows there is an attempt to analyze some aspects that revealed themselves especially relevant in the research process which is the object of our reflection in this article. Participatory research in Latin America originated in the context of strong mobilization for social changes, in many cases against established military dictatorships. Today societies are undergoing important changes in all fields of life, and participatory research faces the challenge of redefining itself within this context. This means above all being attentive to one's own research praxis.

1. Research and human formation (education)

The investigative and formative activities are part of the same process of knowing, i.e., of understanding, intervening and transforming reality. The production of knowledge is situated in a variety of spaces, each one of them with specific characteristics according to the roles of the respective social agents. In this sense, research is part of broad movement of knowing. When farmers in a small village (Salvador das Missões) in the countryside of the state of Rio Grande o Sul told us that with the equivalent to U$ 5,000.00 they

were able to create a cooperative agro-business for the production of derivates from sugarcane and that this production is promoting a reasonable improvement in the local quality of life it becomes evident that there has been generated a socially productive knowledge of enormous potential. It was necessary to learn the techniques for producing the articles from sugarcane; the farmers had to learn about management of their grounds for this specific crop; there was the need for developing new competencies for dialogue and negotiation, for planning and administration. In short, the whole community became involved in a process which implied changing previous knowledge, searching for new information, acquiring new work habits, and adapting or changing the communal traditions.

It is known through the history of participatory research that people move through a vast repertoire of forms of interaction. "While they move in the direction from one to the other, people exchange information, exchange form of knowledge and of knowing, exchange values (Brandão 1986: 167). Today, following Marco Raúl Mejía (2001), we might prefer to substitute the idea of exchange for negotiation, once there are always involved power relations. Research at least the one that intends to be participatory, integrates this complex interplay of negotiations.

Through dialogue with communities and authorities we began, as researchers, to interrogate ourselves about our role within this process of knowing. What is our contribution? What expectations are created about those who present themselves as researchers? To what extent can they be fulfilled? These are some inputs for responding to the question on the role of the researcher:

a) The researcher has a special task in the process of *reading* the context. In the above example, the researcher is in a position to help to understand how the manufacture of sugarcane products in this municipality is related to broader social and economic processes which could lead to the creation of a society where resources are more justly distributed. This formative task was fulfilled through articles in regional and local newspapers in which the local situation was pictured within a larger panorama. The presence of the research team in the communities was itself a way of expanding the reading of the world by these communities.

b) The researcher has at his/her disposition instruments of analysis which allow him/her to systematize and organize already existing knowledge within the communities. This search for totality is obviously subjected to the same logic that covers all forms of knowledge. For instance, the researcher who participates only in the great assemblies of the participatory budget does not see more than party-like activities, being unaware of the fact that for coming to this point a great number of meetings and negotiations have happened. Only a presence marked by trust will be able to open the doors to see the bypasses in the creation of new knowledge. Oscar Jara interprets the systematizing function of the researcher in this expressive metaphor:

> It seems as though the most characteristic and proper aspect of the systematizing reflection would be the fact that it is a process of penetrating the interior of the experiences' dynamics, something as putting oneself "inside" these live and complex social processes, circulating among their elements, touching their relations, collecting their different phases, situating their contradictions, tensions, marches and countermarches, coming thus to understand these processes in their own logic, extracting from them learnings which may contribute for the enrichment as much of practice as of theory (Jara 1996: 12).[6]

c) The researcher finds him/herself in a strategic position to "move" knowledge and information in different fields and spaces. This may happen through participation in congresses, in contact with the greater public through lectures or the media, through contact with public offices eventually influencing policies. Although he or she does not speak in the name of the public, because there may be no formal authorization, there are established links which imply a kind of complicity. The researcher may not

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[6] In the original Spanish: "Parece que lo más característico y proprio de la reflexión sistematizadora sería el que ella busca penetrar en el interior de la dinámica de las experiencias, algo así como meter-se 'por dentro' de esos procesos sociales vivos y complejos, circulando por entre sus elementos, palpando las relaciones entre ellos, recorriendo sus diferentes etapas, localizando sus contradicciones, tensiones, marchas y contramarchas, llegando así a entender estos procesos desde su propria lógica, extrayendo de allí enseñanzas que puedan aportar al enriquecimiento tanto de la prática como de la teoría."

be openly charged with anything, and he or she may not promise anything, but there is an expectation that collected words or images produce effects on other practices or sensitize those in position to decide. As Carlos R. Brandão (1986: 165) put it, "the most important, the fundamental, is not so much popular participation in the investigation, but the political participation of research in the popular movements and struggles." When taken seriously, this will inevitably imply the involvement of the community in the research process.

2. Research and ethical-political commitment

The research process we are referring to was understood as a transformative social, political and cultural practice. Based on the presupposition that social exclusion is historically generated and humanly unacceptable, to engage in research means positioning oneself on the side of society's movements intended to generate life and dignity. That is why research participates in the process of denouncing and announcing. In the case of participatory budgeting there are numerous situations where the old vices of "clientelistic" politics are manifested, for example, when mayors, factory owners or school directors link participation in meetings and assemblies to the vote previously defined by them. There was an attempt not to hide these difficulties. The emphasis, however, was in identifying new possibilities for social organization and for living together. It is in this sense that Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003) refers to a sociology of emergences, which would be particularly able to detect new facets for reshaping democracy.

It was necessary to pay permanent attention to what scientific rigour means, since it is by now clear that the correct application of instruments and the control of variables is not sufficient. Rigour means, among other things, knowing how to move among the different types of knowledge, and ways of knowing in order to help a given community or group to develop their strategies for organization, and to find means that enable them in the struggle for a better living together.

3. Research as multiple interaction of subjects

Research is an act of knowing that takes place among subjects, a movement which reflects life and generates life. There may be identified three dimensions in this interaction:

a) During the process of research, the knowledge from experience and elaborated knowledge are transformed. The purpose is the production of knowledge which allows for a new reading and pronouncing of reality. In a region that produces citric fruits there was discussion about the problem of a disease which was decimating orange plantations. A farmer reminded the others that they had already discovered a "remedy", in this case, the juice of the fruit itself. But these farmers wanted research agencies to support scientific studies on the issue. They knew that, even if their knowledge was important, research could add another dimension to this knowledge. Theirs is not a sufficient knowledge, much less self-sufficient. The challenge, on the other side, is that researchers do the same type of reflection, something quite difficult when, in a strange way, they have been separated from the knowledge of the community which they are supposed to serve. What is needed is not simply an "epistemological rupture" (Santos 2000: 106) promoted by scientists for developing a new common sense, but a permanent dynamic between continuities and ruptures among diverse types of knowledge.

b) Reality is not a dead body to be sectioned and dissected, but it has life, a soul. In other words, reality itself constitutes a subject that interacts with the researcher, many times in unexpected ways: a gesture, a word, a vote may indicate to the researcher that he or she did not understand anything of what was happening around him or her, and he or she will have to learn how to reposition him or herself within this context. For instance, it was quite fascinating to observe how people moved around during the larger assemblies of the participatory budget, reflecting a rather intense process of negotiation that was happening silently. These are movements whose meanings are difficult to capture and which may never become part of the researchers' results. Even in interviews directly following the event, all

sorts of filters would not allow many negotiations that went on behind the scene.

c) To get involved in research implies, sooner or later, researching about oneself, expanding self-awareness about one's limitations and possibilities. The researcher does not enter the field of research as a stable and fixed element. He or she changes why (or when) he or she learns. Writing the results is therefore also a process of self-exposure, of "writing" oneself. To be aware of this helps us avoid two risks to which the researcher is constantly exposed. One of them is to position oneself outside the process, as the butterfly collector who just wants to pin them down. The second risk is to reduce the research object as an excuse for a narcissistic narrative, self indulging and solipsist.

4. Research is a public action for the constitution of the public

During the investigative process the team became increasingly aware of the public character of research. Once, for bringing to attention the researcher's public responsibility. This became manifest, for instance, when in an assembly one of the participants, having in her hands the state's budget proposal, questioned the amount destined by the government for research by the state agency for research. This amount is indeed very much below the level legally approved and researchers struggle desperately for more resources. In this case, what matters are not the figures, but the fact that research itself was being brought into public debate by a farmer. To whom, after all, is the researcher to be held responsible? How does he meet this responsibility?

Research also has a central function in the constitution of the public sphere, as much in the sense of what is common to a community or people, as in the sense of a group who is selected as dialogue partner. The publication of data originated within the research process in seminars, in local newspapers, in interviews to radio and television, functions as a mirror for the community to see and reshape itself. Even within a participative methodology, the researcher is from the outside, and the community in a way expects to see how it turned out in the picture. Research contributes to the constitution of the public to the extent that it helps the community to see and listen to itself, a

fundamental condition for the existence of the public sphere (Arendt 1999: 65).

5. The method as part of the "movement" of research

There were many instruments and techniques used during the research process, such as interviews, participant observation, photos, videos and statements. These techniques do not exist by themselves, but they are the concretization of a conception of method and of a methodological design. Given the variety of understandings of method and methodology it may be useful to clarify the use of the concepts, as developed through the process itself.

From the Greek *meta odos,* the word method means literally "a road to" and since Descartes' *Discourse on Method,* published in 1637, the notion of method has been a central theme in the philosophical and scientific discussions. The arguments for or against method make us aware that it is not possible anymore to conceive of method as a set of steps securely structured to lead us to truth. This pretension has been discarded by the sciences known as "hard", as they open space for notions such as chaos or the continuity between subject and object. Between the simple reaffirmation of an idea of method which shows signs of being worn out, and discarding the pertinence of method altogether, there is a great range of possibilities for redefining. Based on research in Popular Education, Matthias Preiswerk (1994: 61) proposes a conceptualization of method which corresponds to the understanding assumed in our research process:

> I propose, as hypothesis, the necessity to talk about method as a system of relations, as a structure of thought and action, as an inspiration which grasps the ruptures, the displacements, the distances between the subjects with their own desires and needs, the goals that one wants to reach, the processes to reach these goals, the obstacles offered by the context (Preiswerk 1995: 283).[7]

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[7] In the Portuguese original: "Proponho, a título de hipótese, a necessidade de falar do método como sistema de relações, como estrutura de pensamento e de ação, como inspiração que assume as rupturas, as defasagens, as distâncias entre os sujeitos com seus próprios desejos e necessidades, as metas que se pretende alcançar, os processos

Method, as the complex fabric composed of purpose and objectives, of reality and the object, of subjects, time and space, is not something outside and apart from research; in the sense that first one defines the method and if, once well established, a certain method could give a kind of magic key to reality. The method keeps reshaping constantly in the dialogue with and between the various factors. In the image of Mario Quintana, it is the steps that make the road (*The Last Traveler*). This does not exempt the researcher from knowing the roads traveled by others, and to figure out the roads he imagines and projects for his/her own steps.

Methodology, on the other hand, is here understood as a set of procedures and instruments that allow approximation to reality. Throughout the process, there were various experimental forms of constituting our object of study. For example, at the final stage we realized that we had collected a large number of images. With the assistance of a colleague from the field of Semiotics, a seminar was organised on "Images & Research". Social research must also be open to the variety of cultural expressions and find adequate instruments to comprehend them. There are communities, for instance, with a rich tradition of community choirs; in others there is the prevalence of the *gaucho* culture with its characteristic music and dances. It became evident that without considering this aesthetic dimension of local cultures in our research methodology, much of the richness of the phenomena being investigated would be lost.

This has taken us, for instance, to look more closely at the metaphor of the labyrinth as a common expression of Latin American literature. Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Marquez, among many other writers, use this metaphor to express the seemingly unending cycle of dependence and oppression that makes up the Continent's history. The usually very acute perception of reality through artistic expression can open important perspectives for the researcher's understanding of social processes.

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para se alcançar essas metas, os obstáculos oferecidos pelo contexto" (Preiswerk 1995: 283).

Concluding remarks

The intense movement in the research process, attending the assemblies of the participatory budget in various municipalities, being present at council meetings, talking to communities and community leaders as well as participating in academic circles, contributed to a perspective of research as movement: movement of people, of information, of values, of cultures and of worldviews. It is a step, perhaps, in the direction of the "plural knowledge", where, according to Milton Greco, "knowledge assumes an entirely new dimension, where the exchange of knowledge forms a system of relations as important or more important than the newest knowledge in any field." (Greco 1994: 26).

We learned that a pedagogy of participation[8] should have at least four dimensions. First, there is the right to say one's own words. When members of the community take the microphone in their hands and talk about their life experiences, and are listened to by members of the community and by authorities, their words produce a powerful impact. Secondly, there is what could be called a mystique of participation, which starts with the solemn singing of the state's anthem, and goes on with the *chimarrão*[9] that is handed around in most encounters. Third, there is the sharing of a tremendous amount of information and knowledge: about the regional economy, the social situation, and innovations and possibilities. Gradually, this knowledge extrapolates the regional level, and advances to considerations about state, national and global reality. Fourth, there is the connection of daily life experiences, very much on the individual level, with hopes and perspectives for the improvement for the entire community.

In the process, we learned above all that the production of knowledge is not a privilege of institutionalized research, and were challenged to rethink our place in this web where knowing occurs. Among issues that deserve a

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[8]   The findings of this process are registered and analyzed in the book *Dizer a sua palavra* (Streck/Sobottka/Eggert 2005)

[9]   A tea from the *gaucho* culture (Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay and South Brazil), usually drank in groups.

more profound theoretical treatment, two would seem more urgent. First, there is the risk that the movement turns into activism, giving place to a theoretical vacuum. As mentioned before in this article, recent efforts in popular education in Latin America for its "re-founding" had their origin in activism. The anxiety to save the world became an obstacle to understanding the world. A second challenge is to find or create places for encounters: of academics from different fields, of subjects who talk about reality from distinct social and cultural contexts. Research can be an articulating agency for these encounters, creating spaces that function as negotiating tables.

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