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## IF PEOPLE'S MEMORIES ARE IN DANGER, IS DEMOCRACY IN DANGER? REFLECTIONS ON TWO APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

**ABSTRACT:** In this essay, the author reflects on the type of research that it is possible to undertake to produce useful knowledge for common people and, importantly, created by common people starting from their problems, their worries, or their questions. Two different research projects are briefly described, both with an approach based on participatory research. The first, around the repression that occurred in the Spanish Civil War and afterwards during the Franco dictatorship, is research geared to re-appropriate common history and thereby re-write historical memory. The second project has as its focus the re-evaluation of popular craft skills and professions and is centred on examining the significance of the river for a small village in Spain. In the conclusion the author focuses on how this kind of research can help people to leave behind them the Culture of Silence and how it provides them tools for expressing their culture and their histories. The essay also focuses on the co-creation of knowledge as a way to produce alternative knowledge that is able to challenge the *official* versions of knowledge that stand in contradiction to people's life experience.

**KEYWORDS:** co-creation, culture of silence, emancipation, knowledge, participatory research.

### By way of an introduction

This article is not a research paper. The research presented here has been published in articles, books and conferences and the reader – if interested – can find a more detailed description of both of these research projects as well as discussions about methodology, the research teams, *etc.* in the references cited. The main object of this piece is to reflect about my own research in the framework of my own life, my research interest and, importantly, my country.

One preliminary remark about the two research projects should, however, be made. In the case of the first project – the *Taller para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica y Social* (Workshop for the Recuperation of Historical and Social Memory) – it is important to clarify that these adult learners started to work together in 2004 and they still are researching. I have chosen the first research – about the Spanish Civil War and the beginning of the Dictatorship – because it is a good example of how the recovery and saving of people's memories allow us to reinforce democracy in a moment when extreme right-wing fascist parties and parts of the media maintain an endless campaign to deny the crimes committed during the Civil War and the Dictatorship. It is also important for healing wounds. As Dan Bar-On (1989) demonstrated in his research, the

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individual tries to avoid remembering and talking about traumatic events. By telling and sharing these painful histories, however, people feel that they are listened to by others.

The second research project (*The River and the People*) is important because it was a failure. The research team worked back from the people in the communities. Losing the connections with common people was an important element here to learn that we must always seek to work *with* people, not *on* or *around* people or, as in some cases in academia, work for ourselves, utilising the people.

In short, the reader should not expect a research article, on the contrary, it is an attempt to write a reflective paper about democracy and how we can help to strengthen it, or, of course, how it is possible, by not doing so, to weaken it.

### **Research guided by an emancipatory interest**

In recent years, we have lived through a number of dramatic situations. First, there was the COVID-19 pandemic, then the announcement of an economic crisis caused by an unprecedented rise in inflation, and finally the war in Ukraine and a new economic crisis related not only to inflation but also to energy prices and a power-supply emergency. Finally, we see climate change in the form of heat waves, drought, or heavy rains. In this scenario, what is the role of research guided by an emancipatory interest? By way of an answer, Jürgen Habermas (1982) differentiated between a technical interest addressed to the domain of nature, a practical interest focused on the understanding of human behaviour and an emancipatory interest to transform the surrounding reality in which people live. The question is: how do we build this type of research and what kind of methodologies can be used? In this essay, I consider how recuperating people's memories can be considered an act of emancipation.

If we look at the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, we find some notable contradictions between the effects of the crisis and certain responses. Thus, on the one hand, people's suffering was of course the major consequence of the pandemic. People lost their relatives, their friends, and their jobs. When talking about every other aspect of the pandemic – including in papers like this – it is important not to forget this. And it is important also because in the first months of the lockdown in Spain – March and April 2020 – I personally received a lot of invitations to complete questionnaires on the consequences of confinement and the shutdown of schools and universities. As we now know, the consequences of the pandemic are still present in people's daily lives on several levels: economic, psychological, or simply in the shape of an increase in inequalities in each national society and around the world. Such research questionnaires, however, can arguably be seen as an example of an opportunistic and non-reflexive approach to research that forgets the suffering and focuses only on publishing. This kind of research

is often produced by following a neoliberal and factory model – sometimes based on Google Forms questionnaires, for example, and conducted without any personal contact with people – for a fast *sale* in certain journals.

To give another example of the contradictory nature of the effects and responses to COVID-19, a significant consequence of the pandemic can arguably be seen in a re-inforcement of authoritarian attitudes across societies, which were certainly already present before the pandemic, but which the pandemic seems to have promoted, even bolstering the public acceptance of such anti-democratic tendencies. This reinforcement of authoritarian attitudes must be understood not only in political terms but also in scientific, social, and educational terms, as well. Obvious examples are the negation of climate change, or even the existence at all of COVID-19. In social terms, attitudes and discourses about maintaining national or racial purity by avoiding the spurious *mixture* of races, and straightforward racism and xenophobia, are all present in our societies and the political discourses around them are accepted by many people. Also, in educational terms, at least in my country, we have witnessed the consignment to oblivion of whole communities – basically rural communities in what is called “empty Spain” – or the erasure of facts concerning entire historical periods, such as the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship (1936-1975). Two different explanations can help here.

First, let us take authoritarian and anti-scientific attitudes. Science can be used for liberation, for exploitation or even for murder – in the case of the Holocaust, for instance. In this essay I wish to consider – very naively perhaps – science to be for the good. Authoritarian attitudes and anti-scientific thinking, on the other hand, join together in negating equality and diversity in every aspect of social and personal life.

There also is a romantic – and sometimes reactionary – view of the countryside as a place where the pandemic – and other things – never arrive. In the case of “empty Spain”, it is not romanticism that is needed, but the provision of services for a lot of people: internet, health services, schools, public transportation – it is the services that in fact rarely arrive. To forget this is to deny that the dominant model of development is an urban one that uses nature as the private property of humankind.

In short, these neo-authoritarian attitudes we see in Spain, Hungary, Italy, *etc.*, habitually use a mix of populism, fake news and conspiracy theories to attack and discredit science in particular, but in fact everybody who is not male, white, and heterosexual, *etc.* In the end, authoritarian discourses are the curtain that conceals the growth of inequalities and the narrowing of democracy. Thus, for instance, some of the autonomous governments in Spain are currently introducing cuts in funding for the search for people murdered during the Civil War or in relation to LGBTI+ rights (Madrid).

As examples of possible ways in which research can and, I feel, should demonstrate its emancipatory interest, and counteract such tendencies, I shall therefore briefly present

two ongoing studies related to the recovery of people's memories. The first is related to repression and murder during the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. The second is related to the loss of a world of crafts and artisans.

### **Historic and democratic memory**

In my country, Spain, the strengthening of authoritarian attitudes – as I mentioned above – is connected, among other things, to the endless process of revising history to forget the victims of the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship, and to exonerate those responsible for crimes. In Parliament, a former leader of the major right-wing party, the PP (*Popular Party*), recently declared, for example, that the Second Republic (1931-1939) was a democracy without law, and the dictatorship (1939-1975) was law without democracy (El País, June 30, 2021). It seems that he favoured the latter. Further, the new leader of the PP declares that the Civil War was merely a fight between grand-fathers (El Diario, November 6, 2022). To counter this attitude, the government has recently enacted a new law about historic and democratic memory that allowed, for instance, Queipo de Llano (a general responsible for the brutal repression in Seville in 1936 and infamous for radio speeches in which he incited soldiers and falangists to “kill the men and rape the women”) to be exhumed in November 2022 and removed from his grave in a prominent public place in Seville (El País, November 2, 2022).

Data can help us understand the dimension of repression. According to the British historian Antony Beevor (2005), the number of people murdered by the fascists during the Civil War was approximately 200,000 people. This staggering number includes the murders of the poet Federico García Lorca, the Andalusian politician Blas Infante, who was considered the father of Andalusian nationalism, and the anarchist teacher José Sánchez Rosa, famous for his pedagogical writings for the working class and his method of teaching mathematics to adults. This number does not include the people killed over the whole course of the dictatorship (1936-1975). According to the data provided by the Association for the Recuperation of Historic Memory (*Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica - ARMH*) the number of people who “disappeared”, buried in unmarked mass graves or simply in roadside ditches, is around 140,000 (ARMH, 19.12.2022). Most of these people were never found. Since they can be considered to have “disappeared”, it is possible to affirm that Spain is among the countries with the greatest number of disappeared persons. This is nevertheless denied still by some people.

Against this background, a group of adult learners organised a workshop in 2004 in an adult education school located in a working-class neighbourhood in the south-eastern part of Seville. The main characteristics of the district reflect the ongoing

process of migration inside Spain that gave rise to the neighbourhood where the adult education school is situated. At the start of this migration process, the land in this district was still occupied by farmers and was used for their livestock. This farmland was suddenly replaced by cheap blocks of flats. In the 1970s neighbourhood associations<sup>1</sup> were created to fight for public transportation, street lighting, or sewage systems. It is important to stress here that some of these neighbourhoods were only recognised by the municipality of Seville as late as the early 2000s. Low educational levels, precarious jobs and unemployment are some of the features of living in these districts. Altogether they have given rise to rich, and often painful, life experience.

The members of the workshop were adult learners who finished their studies in the adult education school where the workshop took place. Some of them had no previous qualifications before attending the adult education school, and they had not been trained to carry out research before participating in the workshop. They learned to research by researching. There was also a teacher – as coordinator – and other people who were not directly related to the adult education school.

The principal objectives of the workshop can be summarised as follows:

- To reconstruct the life stories of individuals;
- To contextualise the narrative of life histories and confront/complement them with school textbooks, novels, oral testimonies, and other sources of information;
- To help people recuperate their dignity and a sense of recognition and self-esteem;
- To disseminate the research.

The research method used in the workshop was designed to take into account the following changes:

- Changes to what should be understood, shifting attention from the main characters of *big* stories to the day-to-day lives of ordinary people;
- Changes regarding the subject who understands, because the people who look at the past to learn and to understand are not scholars, but ordinary people who recognise themselves as the subjects of what they are investigating;
- Changes in the method of research, seeking to find a common viewpoint about the past and how this past affects their current lives.

The research method was focused on the principle of letting “the memory, the voice and the liberating word of the people” flourish (Lucio-Villegas et al., 2009: 132). To do this, they used people’s life histories. Interviews were recorded in audio and video, then the transcripts made from these were analysed to extract the major themes – the “generative themes” in Paulo Freire’s terminology (Freire, 1970) – and finally the life

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<sup>1</sup> Neighbourhood associations were very important in the final years of the dictatorship and the beginning of democracy in Spain. They led to the participation of neighbours in demanding improvements to their neighbourhood.

history was discussed with the interviewee, who changed it, corrected it, *etc.* The informant is always the owner of their own words.

As pointed out above, the workshop began in 2004 with research on the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship. The starting point of the research, as I have indicated elsewhere (*e.g.*, Lucio-Villegas, 2022) was María's testimony:

It was August 10 [1936], my father was at the farmhouse with the goats, and he came to bring the milk. My mother went to take it to the shopkeeper, and my father remained at the door [of the house] with one of my sisters who was still not walking and my three-year-old brother who was playing with her. Three men, two policemen and a Falangist, got out [of a car] and told him to go with them to answer some questions. My father gave me the girl and he sat me on the chair. When my mother arrived and asked about him, people told her that some men had taken him away. My mother ran to see what was going on, and she met a neighbour [who told her]: "Your husband was taken by el bizco Santiago, el Tejero" (the cross-eyed tilemaker) [...] My father never returned [...] 38 were shot at the gate of the cemetery [...] It was August 12, 1936 [...] My mother had 5 children, and she was also 3 months pregnant. The baby was born, and he never met his father and died after 6 months (Taller para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, 2007: 144-145).

After this research was published, the workshop participants moved on to do research on the social movements and the life in the neighbourhood during the time of the return of democracy – a time called in Spain *La Transición* (1975-1978). At the present time, people involved in the workshop are carrying out research into an important local textile factory – now shut down – that played an important role in the life of the neighbourhood and in the birth of trade unions in Seville.

According to José María López Luna (López Luna, 2011), the results deriving from such research processes are considerable. On the one hand, the workshop participants learned from the investigation not only about the process of research itself but also about the circumstances affecting their lives and the lives of their families that emerged while carrying out the research. Another result was related to the acquisition of tools to give expression to their voice and to be listened to by others. For instance, people learned how to express their thoughts and ideas when speaking in public. Also, they learned to include music and poetry in creative ways in their presentations. The publication of two books stands out, as well as the making of a DVD and other audio-visual material.

In addition, for some people, the workshop was also an opportunity to honour the people who were imprisoned or murdered during the dictatorship. The research experience also made participants aware of the existence of an alternative version of Spain's history, and that it is vital to bring this alternative narrative to light by creating alternative knowledge. Such knowledge is important not only for the reasons mentioned above, but also because this alternative knowledge is essential if democracy is to be defended against the rise of Spanish (and other) fascist parties that aim to rewrite a history

made up in reality of silence, repression, and murders. Traditionally, the Civil War is presented only as a series of battles, troop movements, and so on, but the suffering, the murder and the imprisoning of people is denied or made invisible. Dictatorship itself is present only as the names of politicians and successive government cabinets. School textbooks make no reference to the sustained repression, the use of slave labour, the fight for democracy, the poverty of people, or the migration from the countryside to the cities or to other countries to escape hunger (Lucio-Villegas, 2022).

### **The river and the people**

This second research project, still in progress, is aimed at recovering the memory of the Guadalquivir River where it passes through a village called C., twelve kilometres from the city of Seville in southern Spain. This research started as a Participatory Research project. In the process of the research, the team was unable, however, to really connect with people in the community. The analysis of why this occurred has no place here and will be addressed at a later time. As a result of this basic failure, however, the research is now limited to an ethnographic study of significant facets of life around the river and of the loss of a traditional society that gave identity to the people living on the banks of the river before it was transformed into a mere dormitory village.

The research raises important questions about the river and its influence on people's daily lives and helps to create knowledge that can recover and maintain an almost lost world of craftsmen and artisans. The aim was to convey to the younger generations what the river's role historically was, and perhaps still is, for the village in question. The main research questions were related to the way people understand social change in their surrounding reality and how adult education can help people understand these changes better. As the research methodology changed, the research questions acquired a more descriptive scope.

The research team was composed of people from diverse backgrounds: retired adult education teachers, civil servants from the municipality, social movement advocates, and teachers and students from the university and adult education schools. Interestingly, the diversity of people composing the research team was both a valuable resource and a disadvantage. Some research paths moved away from the original project and some problems arose during the time of the research. We tried to deal with these issues by adopting a very slow process of dialogue and by focusing on a participatory approach. Sometimes, however, it didn't work, and the research team was ultimately reduced to two people.

The modified research questions can be summarised as follows: How do people understand the changes in their surrounding environment, and how can adult education

help people understand these changes and recover/maintain their identity – in this case, in relation to their craft practices?

To date, twelve interviews have been conducted – mainly with men. The interviewees were selected among local people by members of the research team or in the second phase, by professionals working in the village. The main criteria for the selection of interviewees were their having ample knowledge of the river, the village, and the crafts associated with them. Following these criteria, some of the individuals interviewed were, for example, sailors, fishermen, net manufacturers, and brick factory owners. Only two women with special knowledge of the river and village were interviewed, which obviously represents an important imbalance. The interviews were always audio-recorded and, in some cases, video-recorded. The same person carried out all the interviews, in order to unify questions and discourse. The interviews were transcribed and analysed with a first speculative analysis, and then the information was classified and categorised (Woods, 1987). Categories appear during the speculative analysis and are derived from people's testimonies. For instance, some people talked about the punishment they received for taking baths in the river. Another informant talked about specific words that are related to a traditional craft. The first testimonies were collected in a category called "the twilight zone", the second in a different category called "the lost words" (Lucio-Villegas, 2018). I will present below a few results of this process of categorisation.

In the brief excerpts from the interviews that follow, I focus mainly on aspects of the investigation related to craft (see Lucio-Villegas 2018; 2020). Craft is a useful category for an analysis of social change, because of its relation to the productive system, the craft knowledge, and the identity related to the work. It also influenced family relationships, not only through the transmission of the craft to the younger generation, but also through the organisation of the work. In traditional societies, crafts are passed down in family networks "*that have been acquired from fathers to sons, you know?*". This process also establishes close relationships between different craftspeople. "*I started to work as a carpenter with my uncle*", a fisherman explained. Such crafts are also a kind of inheritance passed on traditionally from fathers to sons.

*I was born in a fishing family in C. My father died when I was young, my mother became a widow with 8 sons. My oldest brother became responsible for the family. We inherited a little fishing boat from my father. Of course, my brother started to work in it. I was 11 or 12.*

Due to the mixture between job, craft and family, learning about and becoming part of the world of work could be a hard process of exploitation.

*My father took me out [of school] to learn the craft with my uncle, without earning anything, and I told my father, "Dad, I work more than my cousins and much more than everyone, but I don't earn anything".*

Since crafts were linked to family relationships, this also meant the loss of traditional crafts when family bonds are broken.

*Look! There is my son [...] with me it's all over. He is an industrial engineer and doesn't want to know anything about it.*

Turning now to the category of lost words, as an instance of the loss of a specific language related to craft, the owner of a brick factory explains the reason for calling the clay used for the bricks "fish".

*[The clay] was collected on boards where it was cut with an 'esteron'. [a kind of big box to collect and transport fish] This 'esteron' was the same used to extract the fish from the boats and this is the reason that the clay [extracted from the river] is called "fish".*

As for the unknown river, it is a mysterious space – a "twilight zone" – where nature surpasses the efforts of people to understand it. This unknown element led people to develop a magical consciousness about the river that is fatalist in accepting the river as something beyond their control. For instance, when the river flooded almost every winter:

*Here you have your thirty cows in winter and then a flood came, and when you could get there [to the place where the cows were], there were no more cows.*

Perhaps the most interesting evidence of this fatalistic view is related to the fear of the river itself. A kind of reverential fear that is present in the prohibition of bathing:

*Sure! Of course, you had a sure beating.... If your father knew that you had gone to the river to have a swim, if a friend [of your father] saw you [bathing and told him,] 'I saw your son in the river,' the beating was certain.*

In the end, the most important thing here seems to be the importance of maintaining culture as defined by Raymond Williams, as a "way of life" including work, intellectual practices, or artistic activities (Williams, 1983: 89). But also, in the sense defined by Clifford Geertz (1987) as a system of meanings that enable people to situate themselves in a symbolic universe where every practice holds a significance.

## Conclusions

The main question here can be defined as follows: Why do I insist on conducting this kind of research – with its successes and failures – which may be distant from a lot of mainstream research, or from the kind of research I mentioned at the outset involving perhaps questionnaires via Google, data analysis apps and factory-style dissemination?

Furthermore, why do I think that this kind of research can be useful for people and can help to maintain democracy? To reply, I must briefly talk about two theoretical concepts: the *Culture of Silence* and the *co-creation of knowledge*.

Paulo Freire (1970) affirmed that the *Culture of Silence* does not refer to people who have no culture, but to people who have no way of expressing their culture. The most important point here, in my opinion, is that certain people experience difficulties in expressing their culture not because of themselves, but because certain powers in society – the “oppressor” in Freire’s terminology – prevent this expression. People living in a *Culture of Silence* are not listened to by others. However, they want not only to tell their story to others, but to be listened to. One of the important issues here is whether they are the owners of their own history. I am convinced that Participatory Research enables participants to construct their own history, and from that they can share and disseminate it. In the same direction, the theoretical contributions of the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (Fals Borda, 1986) are extremely valuable. His work discloses the lessons learned recovering the histories of peasants by using oral stories, memories, and biographies in a participatory research process. In this process, research and community come together to provide answers to the problems people face. It seems that the main conclusion we can draw from Fals Borda’s work is that the recovery of memory enables citizens to better organise their community.

*Co-creation of knowledge*, on the other hand, means, among other things, that people can recuperate the knowledge that is thrown out by the *official* version of knowledge. This is certainly the case with knowledge about the Spanish Civil War, that is not present in school textbooks, and it is also true in regard to knowledge about traditional crafts, which are lost in the mainstream of globalisation and are only presented as touristic attractions, without the cultural framework that allows people to understand their use and evolution. To recover this knowledge, however, is to create a democracy of knowledge (Hall, 2011).

A further question can be asked given the type of results presented briefly above: what methodologies can promote this type of research? I argue that Participatory Research is an important approach. To answer why I consider Participatory Research to be so relevant, I shall focus on the Historic Memory Workshop, though what I say is equally valid for the original river research project. As I see it, the Memory Workshop undertook four tasks, which can be summarised as follows:

First, an action plan is addressed to define the main idea, search for key informants, and organise the interviews. According to Freire (1970), this is the listening phase in which people try to collect information, but also to meet with other people interested in the research. Only after this process of listening is it possible to define the generative themes in the next step.

Then follows the analysis of the interviews. This is the first step in the production of knowledge. It is the moment when information accumulated is organised, the categories of analysis are defined, and, in doing this, the generative themes are defined. In a sense, it is the moment of the co-creation of knowledge which integrates diverse voices and achieves a form of “choral knowledge” (Lucio-Villegas, 2015).

Third, after the organisation and analysis of the interviews, and the definition of generative themes, comes the phase in which this knowledge is situated in a more ample framework by confronting the individual testimonies with the standard knowledge of textbooks and other *official* sources of knowledge. The process of creation is concentrated work carried out by the members of the workshop in regular meetings during which a collaborative and collective approach to knowledge creation takes place.

Finally, there is a process of dissemination. This dissemination is achieved, among other things, by publishing books, producing DVDs, and visiting adult education schools, secondary schools, or even the university, for public presentations of the books and testimonies, as well as the research process. This final step supports the construction of liberating practices in the community. In this moment, the knowledge returns to the people and can become a source of transformative actions such as fighting against power cuts, fighting for premises for the adult education, and so on. These actions are not necessarily connected with the research itself. Paolo Orefice (1987) considered that one of the major achievements of Participatory Research is in fact to strengthen the process of community organisation.

These examples of the scope of Participatory Research practice, as with those recounted by numerous researchers (see for instance Fals Borda, 1986; Orefice, 1987; Swantz, Ndedya & Masaiganah, 2001), work to promote a reconstruction of the daily lives of people and to enable them to understand their history. By doing so, it can become a way to rebuild democracy in a historical moment full of uncertainties about the future. It is clearly important to differentiate between participation as a way to reinforce democracy, and manipulation of populist grievances in order to destroy democratic institutions, for example by storming parliaments, as experienced in the USA and Brazil. I believe that the research processes presented here can help to rebuild democracy because they enable people to become more conscious of their rights, of their history and their situation, and also of their responsibilities. Without this conscientisation, as the 92-year-old Italian Senator and Auschwitz survivor Liliana Segre, affirms: “If memory is lost, the world will be condemned”, forced to repeat its errors in perpetuity (El Diario, January 3, 2023).

How can Participatory Research help us to deal with these dilemmas? Why should Participatory Research be considered different in any way to other research methodologies? I argue that it is different, in the first place, because it is a process of creating

a form of knowledge (Hall & Tandon, 2021) which Peter Park (2001) called “relational knowledge” that “makes it possible to create and sustain a community” (Park, 2001: 86), and that must be seen as the result of a collective endeavour. This knowledge can help people to transform their reality or, at least, a part of it. It can also help people become more conscious and to search for moments of transformative learning by discovering generative themes that can provide responses and solutions to the problems, desires and/or curiosities of people (Freire, 1970; Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011). In this way, more as a collective effort than as an individual effort, it is possible, returning to the beginning of this piece, to talk of doing emancipatory research (Inglis, 1997), in order to transform the reality in which people live.

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