

**SHAPING
THE
FUTURE**

Context and diffusion of knowledge

A critique of Eurocentrism

Orlando Fals-Borda and Luis E. Mora-Osejo
National University of Colombia, Bogota

ABSTRACT

On January 4, 2001, in Bogota, Colombia, the authors issued a self-described 'manifesto'¹ to Colombian scholars inviting them to rescue local values of self-esteem and creativity and to resist intellectual colonialism by European and North American colleagues. After months of discussion, they decided to revise the document and publish an expanded text. Eyebrows were raised not only because this is an interdisciplinary document (signed by a biologist and by a sociologist without any visible signs of disagreement on such sensible matters) but also because both are known to have been trained and given doctorates during the 1950s at the University of Florida and Mainz Johannes-Gutenberg University respectively.

KEY WORDS

- context
- endogenesis
- paradigms
- participation
- tropics

Toward a contextual hypothesis

We both have admitted and still believe that we received the best possible training from our professors, who were world-recognized authorities. We assimilated their teachings eagerly and transferred their frames of reference, methodological and theoretical orientations into Colombia. Without being fully conscious of it, we also transmitted their thematic preferences, naturally derived from the actual circumstances of their background, their times and their institutions. This somewhat spontaneous transfer of knowledge did serve a good purpose in helping to awaken to Colombian conditions.

In Columbia in the 1950s universities had been ignored by governments and left without sufficient resources. Moreover, traditional elites were inclined to imitate and adopt foreign traits and cultures. We both were given good opportunities to serve our society, and we were left mostly to ourselves in regard to the nature and content of the subjects we taught. Our positive educational direction became strained after about a decade, when we noticed that some central concepts, principles and theories learned abroad did not find commensurable replication or confirmation in the conditions in which we were living and working. Social, economic and political factors were so resistant that they virtually obliterated much of the respected academic rule of the knowledge accumulated abroad.

In the social sciences, we were challenged by structural and open violence, an intractable monster still at large; in the natural sciences, especially biology, the challenge came from observing and dealing with the unique characteristics of the tropical milieu in the Amazonian and Andean regions, all of which contradicted well-known frames of reference. These discrepancies and negativities were of such nature and scope that we felt we had to re-learn much of our disciplines. We discovered the obvious fact that contexts mattered for meaningful observation and abstraction, and to deal in a satisfactory way with natural and social phenomena.

After much deliberation we concluded that we had to fly alone. At the time of our Manifesto in 2001, we agreed to frame our concern for contextualization in the following manner:

As human products, scientific frames of reference receive inspiration and concreteness from cultural, historical, and geographical contexts. This is a universal process with different modalities, which are justified by the search for a fullness of life and spiritual as well as material satisfaction for those who intervene and share in the creativity/inquiry process and in its diffusion. (2001, p. 7)

This is nothing new, of course, and during our university training there had been a nebulous understanding of what was meant with 'context'. We tried to combine the contextual hypothesis with the more contemporary concept of endogenesis, as expressed in our Manifesto, where *endogenesis* is a biological term referring to 'growth from within'.

With the advantage of hindsight, after 50 years of experience and study in tropical and violent areas in Colombia, we realize that we could have done better had we re-read some of our Euroamerican university textbooks and manuals more critically. As a belated exercise, we did so with unsatisfactory results. We understood context better through contact with, or by reading from, local respected elders and sages in our base or ethnic communities, or by reflecting on our own socialization at home.

As a theoretical construct, contextualization could be seen as a widespread principle of life, almost common sense. Although it had not been a clear-cut heritage from our university training in Europe and the US, it could be useful nevertheless for our scientific and disciplinary purposes in Colombia. From the standpoint of sociology, one could find passing references to 'context' in the revered essays by W. F. Ogburn (1912–1956) (1957), and we could relate it to the well-known principle of 'definition of the situation' by W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki (1958, p. 43), which included recognition of the role of church and family. But the same idea is of course older, if we remember Blaise Pascal's dictum that 'what is truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other.'

Somewhat clearer in the broader sense of the term 'context' that we use in the Manifesto, where the idea is considered as 'perspective/vision' or 'Weltanschauung' as in the sociology of knowledge when examining different paradigms. Karl Mannheim (1936, p. 89) stated that 'no human thought is immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context,' including common sense knowledge. A similar approach is found in Berger and Luckmann when they state that 'specific agglomerations of reality and knowledge pertain to specific social contexts, and these relationships will have to be included in an adequate sociological analysis of these contexts' (1966, p. 13). Yet context is still limited to the social, and seen mostly as a latent or constant factor.

From the standpoint of the natural sciences, we discovered considerable assistance in the work of philosophers of biology like Ernst Mayr (1988) who had been fighting mechanistic and deterministic interpretations. Mayr appealed to the concept of 'living systems' as 'complex open systems' and defined them as follows: 'The complexity of living systems exists at every hierarchical level from the nucleus to the cell, to any organ system, to the individual, the species, the ecosystem, the society' (p. 14). This definition broadened the scope of the life sciences and social sciences. It was flexible enough to include our idea of contextualization as a dynamic, open phenomenon that implies a respect for, and concern with, meanings, symbols, discourses, values and norms connected with a complex time-and-space dimension that is ecological, social and cultural.

Lags and paradigms

Once we adopted an open and systemic contextual hypothesis as an instrument to determine an ethos or collective vision of a ‘mother society’ with living beings, observers, and creators, we could move on to criticize Eurocentric paradigms and Eurocentric teachings by locating them where they belong: within their own time/space realities and milieux. This observation can induce independence among intellectuals in poorer nations, as inside observers and actors who are more fully in charge of their own ways and means, including the mysterious patterns of our unique tropical world. It would have been expected that the idea of Eurocentrism, as a formal concept, would not be in the curricula of European and/or American universities, and this was not the case when we were students there. Yet there have been some self-critical attitudes among radical intellectuals, like Sartre and Rolland. References can be found in the works of Edward Said, Immanuel Wallerstein, André Gunder Frank.

The first systematic treatise on the subject of Eurocentrism comes from the Egyptian economist Samir Amin (1985). For Amin, Eurocentrism is a culturalist expression of ongoing capitalist world expansion. Like its better known political cousin, Development, Eurocentrism proposes the western mode of life, economy and culture as a model to be adopted by the rest of the world, as the only solution to the challenges of our times. It fits well with the ideologies of globalization. However, as European and North American scientific paradigms have been conceived in the contexts of temperate zones and their historical, cultural and material development, they are similarly conditioned by those contexts in the determination of collective thinking and action. These paradigms have spread to the rest of the world creating a breach between their societies and ours in the South. Advanced countries have been able to develop a strong knowledge-building capacity, in part with inputs from resources and riches of our southern nations. Some of those paradigms became dominant in many societies but the resulting imbalance has produced not only a powerful economic base in the North supported by sophisticated technologies but also a one-sided worldwide political and economic system posed to favor the richer countries where southern realities and facts may be unknown, disregarded, or unilaterally exploited.

At least on the basis of the contextual hypothesis, it appears to us that those *ex novo* facts do not make Euroamerican scientific paradigms – notably Cartesian positivism, Newtonian mechanism, Marxian determinism, and Parsonian functionalism – any better, superior or more pertinent for local purposes, than those generated in other parts of the world. They are conditioned by history, culture and environment. Descartes’ thinking was molded by the insecurities of the Thirty Years War and his secular dualism and belief in control of nature were understandable rebellions and alternative quests. Today what may best be recovered from him may be his revolt against the status quo including traditional

universities. Newton, like Talcott Parsons, was overtaken by the relativity theory and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, although some of Newton's camouflaged insights taken from medieval magicians could still be worthy of attention today. And Marx and his European followers should be understandably forgiven for their lack of knowledge of Latin American history and culture.

Paradigms derived from the reflections of those great men are now like still pictures on a movie camera, often just parroted and being presented as dominant patterns of thinking for contemporary problems in the so-called Third World and elsewhere. We forget that they are all social constructs and are subject to revision and interpretation. It is therefore understandable that if a scientific frame of reference is not well rooted in its milieu, theoretical and practical lags would occur with consequent dysfunctional implications for sociopolitical and other systems. We also state in our Manifesto that such situations are worsened when frames of reference are copied or badly adapted from extraneous paradigmatic sources, like those implied by Eurocentrism and Development. Their imitations often become a source of local disorganization and anomie. For example, the Cartesian rationality of the 'Green Revolution' of the 1950s was bent against those it purported to serve, the poor peasants; advanced machinery created difficult lag problems when imported to retarded economies; and functional American institutions found strong cultural resistance when tried elsewhere. Such has been the fate of much of Development in all these years since it was invented in 1949 by the American Government.

More endogenous paradigms rooted in our own realities and circumstances would likely have contributed more effectively to our progress. Our experience has shown that such alternative paradigms, more open than those imported from advanced countries, could offer constructive ways out of our problems, as suggested below.

Complexity in the tropics

Life conditions in the Andean and Amazonian tropical regions are unique and diverse. They need to have adequate and proper explanations, management techniques, and governmental institutions according to local exigencies. We detail these processes in our Manifesto. From the scientist's point of view, the knowledge of local realities turns out to be as rich and useful as made possible by his/her personal involvement, that is, through life experience or 'vivencia'. Scientific insight and authority come from this involvement with real life. We have learned that endogenesis of this kind opens the way for useful discoveries and initiatives apt to alleviate social problems within the local world. We as insiders to the tropics are in a privileged position to produce, analyze and systematize this knowledge with the help and contribution of autochthonous peoples.

Fortunately awareness of these abilities is increasing, as witnessed by local inventions by Andean farmers (improved seeds and plants, potato sorters and the like) and city dwellers (in community improvement programs, dance and music) and in civic movements like peace programs, land takeovers from *latifundists*² and water distribution systems.

We know that environmental factors in the tropics are complex and clearly distinct from those of other world zones, notably the temperate ones. Yet we have received from the North, often with good intentions, economic, social, cultural paradigmatic and developmental advice that many of us have considered final and sufficient. This limiting procedure has had the additional effect of nullifying or undervaluing the intellectual production of our people, which may be more pertinent to our needs. Intellectual colonialism on our part is one negative result, as shown in many published works. Such extraneous and/or incompatible formulae are precisely the ones that in our zones have had negative environmental impact. For example, our forests utilize subtle ways to gain mineral nutrients from poor soils, as is the case with leaf decomposition induced by rain, then captured by mycorrhizal fungi, which then return the nutrients to the trees. This is a continuous growth cycle that our aboriginal and peasant communities understand well. In fact they have created or discovered for centuries many varieties of plants useful for mankind, and they have developed basic behaviors and social organs congruent with those processes. Yet dominant paradigms constructed in temperate zones usually cannot accommodate such indigenous, ancient wisdoms. They are closed to them and lead to tragic mistakes like those caused by transferring neat, homogeneous planting systems from North America to Amazon pluvial bushes. It is known that the highest indices of organic diversity are found in our territories, as for instance in savannah lands, coral reefs, and deep-sea waters, besides humid forests. As suggested in the Manifesto, we need to enrich traditional knowledge about these systems with academic knowledge about their potential, and also to develop effective procedures for their sustainable use.

Steps are being taken in this direction. Similar challenges are met in customs, values and patterns of social organization that we have given ourselves. This is important because it is also among us where there is the greatest loss in biodiversity, and where there are the biggest threats for the survival of life not only here but also for the entire world.

Need for endogenesis

Explanatory and reproductive endogenesis is necessary. It is required by the infinite contextual reality of our milieu, a task that is not adequately anticipated by Eurocentric paradigms, techniques and institutions. We are more fully aware of the marked differences of our local world, especially in fragility and complexity

in regard to climate, soil and ecosystems as compared with those of other zones. This in turn conditions human behavior and enriches cultural patterns. The harmonious reconstruction of the relationship of people and nature in our country implies a rediscovery of the peculiarities of our daily living and our socialization processes. Independent scientific research focused on the intricacies of our medium and on our specific social, cultural and historical development is proving to be useful for our needs, as described above. Let us remember that the tropical climate is characterized by the Circadian seasonal rhythm – summer in daytime, winter at night. This condition is accentuated as one goes higher into the mountains. It is also characterized by intermittent oscillations of radiation, relative humidity and temperature during the daily light cycle, notwithstanding the stability shown by monthly averages. Moreover, even in reduced tropical forests there are hundreds of trees, but each species has just a small number of individuals in place. The megafauna is also found in small numbers. The habitat appears then to be structured like a fine mesh of specific niches. Such is the way in which the immense biodiversity of the tropical ecosystems is formed, in the lowlands as well as on the mountains. This process also gives rise to ecological patterns of thought, feeling and action in our cultural and ethnic groups.

It may be seen that with these dynamic contextual flows effective solutions can be gained which cannot be transposed from foreign, authoritative or closed constructs. It is increasingly important for academics and practical leaders to exercise our investigative self-discipline in observing realities and making inferences accordingly.

Creativity and knowledge accumulation

Our Manifesto ends with an invitation. Although it is possible, logical and convenient to develop scientific paradigms and technical frames of reference with our own intellectual and practical means, we cannot do this ignoring what is foreign. However, intellectual colonialism and development cannot continue as we form reference groups of our own. This task is best done when it is interdisciplinary and open, and when it anticipates possible universal interest. To this end the capacity of our local human element has been amply confirmed for centuries. We have been able to accede readily to the imbedded factors of our human and natural environments, to be socially and culturally creative with universal recognition and to produce and invent in material fields with traditional and modern know-how. We have done this up to the present, albeit hampered by poverty; ignorance and disease; political discrimination and rigid seigniorial structures; economic dependence and exploitation; violent upheavals; and mental and spiritual captivity. Of course we have tried not to become xenophobic nor isolated from the intellectual world. But we have tried to comply with the need to accumulate

diverse patterns of thought and action congruent with our specific modalities of growth and progress – a process defined as ‘knowledge summation’ or ‘convergence’ in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) school that we developed in the so-called Third World.

We cannot overlook the type of intellectual accumulation that has occurred in the North with its technical superiority. Yet such northern vision and know-how can be more useful and pertinent to the South if they become horizontal and symmetric with enough respect for what we in the South have learned and discovered on our own with PAR and other schools, and with the concurrence of the common peoples.

The 21st century has opened with a battery of new critical tools inspired in diverse consolidated systems of thought, yet they can converge. Such may be the course with PAR. This may be fortunate, as such convergent systems can help all of us – in the North as well as in the South – to understand those complex, irregular, multilinear and fractal dimensions of our tropical social and natural structures. In this manner we can work together more constructively. For example, European complexity and open systems theories like those by P. B. Checkland, Robert Flood or Ernst Mayr can be enriched with the findings of Chile’s Humberto Maturana or of the Colombian Desana Indians’ ‘circuit of the biosphere’; the theory of chaos (Mandelbrot, Prigogine) can be refreshed with daily-living studies like those of Venezuela’s Jeanette Abuabara; Peter Reason’s ‘participatory worldview’ can be contextualized with Father Camilo Torres’ ‘participant utopia’; and holism (cf., Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra) can find support in aboriginal and oriental thinkers.

An alliance of North and South colleagues sympathetic to these intellectual, social and political developments may be formed by all of us who are interested in similar problems and motivated by convergent interests – an alliance between peers that could everywhere face up to the structural injustices and global defects of the modern world (cf. Fals-Borda, 1996). With such objectives in mind, we can stimulate combined research-and-teaching attitudes and practices within and outside educational institutions which are able to overcome discriminatory distinctions, such as those between the academic and the popular, between the scientific and the political, and to stimulate self-esteem among our peoples and in our academic communities. This is indispensable for satisfactory living in countries as privileged as Colombia.

Note

- 1 The full text of the original manifesto can be seen in *Globalisation, Education and Society*, 1(1), (March 2003).
- 2 A *latifundista* is the owner of a large estate.

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Orlando Fals-Borda is Founder of the School of Sociology at the National University of Colombia and Professor Emeritus. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Florida; and has contributed to fields such as participatory-action research, social and political movements, and social history. He is a former viceminister and national deputy and recipient of awards and distinctions in Colombia and elsewhere.
[Email: iepri@bacata.usc.unal.edu.co]

Luis E. Mora-Osejo is President of the Colombian Academy of Exact, Physical and Natural Sciences, Professor Emeritus of the National University of Colombia. He is the former Rector of the University of Nariño (Colombia), Dean of Faculty of Sciences, Director of Institute of Natural Sciences and Biology Department, Director of Bogota's Botanical Garden, and Corresponding Member of Academies in London, Madrid, Caracas. He is also the author of books on tropical flora and fauna. He is a Doctor in Natural Sciences of Johannes-Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany and has been recipient of most important awards in science in Colombia.
[Website: <http://www.accefyn.org.co>]