

CASE STUDIES

INVESTIGATING REALITY IN ORDER TO TRANSFORM IT: THE COLOMBIAN EXPERIENCE

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There exist relatively few occasions, in the course of a lifetime, which provide the opportunity to confront processes of radical, social transformation. As a generation, it is our privilege to live this process today, and to do so with the advantages and disadvantages offered by contemporary development. It is also our responsibility, as members of a scientific community, to know how to interpret this process of change and derive from it the adequate information necessary for understanding and catalysing this transformation so that we may help to construct the future.

Now to combine life experience which has become a part of us with what is rational in these processes of radical change constitutes the basis of the problem at hand. We encounter an ontological problem, one of general concepts, which cannot be ignored.

In particular, we must ask what demands has the reality of change made upon us with respect to our role as "scientists"; we live, for better or worse, not only as men and women but as individuals "qualified" to examine and criticize society.

The special tools of our trade have provided the frames of reference with which successive

generations of scientists have endeavored to interpret reality. However, as is well known, these tools do not have a life of their own, but rather, take on the meaning which we give them, along with consequent effects in varying fields of knowledge. Therefore, we must know how to select that which is in harmony with our vision of social responsibility; and, at the same time, that which satisfies our life experience.

These agonizing problems of work conception and theoretical articulation have made themselves felt in the Colombian experience which a number of social researchers have lived through and attempted to rationalize during the last few years (since 1970) [1]. The fact that problems can only now be pronounced upon with some degree of specificity is, in itself, part of the experiential rational process which we have undergone. Here, I shall present these preliminary reflections which also represent the balance of our experience. Hopefully, this will further a dialogue which, for us, continues to be necessary. In fact, such a dialogue is already being carried out on a worldwide scale; the preoccupations generic to the Colombian case have been multiplied, in the last few decades, whenever and wherever a conscientious attempt has been made to promote revolutionary changes which were later

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frustrated or, sometimes unexpectedly, deformed. We are dealing then with a theoretical and practical problem of the utmost seriousness and urgency.

For purposes of the present study, it will suffice to point out the following pertinent facts:

1. Our action research was directed towards understanding the historical and social situation of groups of workers, farmers, and Indian peoples subjected to the impact of capitalistic expansion, that is to say, the most exploited and marginal sectors of our society.

2. This effort did not attempt to go beyond basic soundings on the problem of how to relate socio-historical understanding to the practice of responsible local and national organization (political and/or otherwise) in the context of class struggle in the state at large.

3. These "experiments" were conducted in five rural and coastal regions, and in two cities, of Colombia. They were undertaken by professionals or intellectuals committed to study action, and local cadres related to workers' or peasants' unions.

4. From the beginning, this work was independent of all political parties or groups, although there were contacts and interchange with those political groups that were interested in the method adopted.

Moreover an attempt was made to respond, in practice, given the sharpening dilemma (since 1967) faced by scientists (and by intellectuals in general) to demands arising from the reality of social change.

These experiments in action research were not always coherent and suffered from inevitable errors; they generated failures, misunderstandings, polemics, and reflections. The problem of linking knowledge and action — theory and practice — is a permanent and never ending effort to understand, revise and overcome an unending and difficult uphill (I will not say Sisyphian) struggle; one which is lined with obstacles. This has been the

human struggle since the beginning.

Now, for thegnoseological presuppositions of this approach; they can be summarized in the following manner:

1. The problem of the relationship between thinking and being is resolved by observing the material which is outside ourselves and independent of our consciousness. This includes not only that which is verifiable in nature but also the fundamental, primary conditions of human existence.

2. The problem of forming and converting knowledge is not resolved by differentiating the phenomena from the things-in-themselves but rather by establishing the difference between that which is known and that which remains unknown. All knowledge is unending and variable. For this reason, it is subject to dialectic reasoning; born of ignorance our efforts to convert it make it more complete, more suited to our purposes, but never final.

3. The problem of the relationship between thought and action is resolved by reviewing the actual activity of things. This can only be derived through experience which, in this sense, occurs prior to reflection. There, objective truth is demonstrated; that is, matter in movement.

4. The problem of the relationship between form and content is resolved by establishing the possibility of overcoming their apparent differentiation not only through intuitive or contemplative behavior but through experience as well. All things lend themselves to an inextricable complexity of form and content. Hence, theory cannot be separated from practice, nor the subject from the object.

SCIENCE AND REALITY

Although it was not until 1970 that fieldwork among workers, farmers and Indians of Colombia was formally conceived in the mode of action research, theoretical and methodological difficulties had already been experienced

prior to that time. Neither the terms of reference, nor the categories operating within the standard sociological paradigms imported from Europe and the United States were satisfactory. These were found to be inapplicable to the existing reality, ideologically corrupted in defending the interests of the dominant bourgeoisie, and too specialized to be of use in attempting to understand the totality of the phenomena confronted daily [2].

Without entering into a discussion as to why these terms and categories were rejected [3] it will be enough to say that the experience accumulated during the past few years indicates that there existed profound motives for this rejection. These were related to the concepts of science and reality being used, concepts which, at that initial moment, were not understood in their full magnitude and consequence. I shall now examine several of these implications.

(A) On Causality

One is reminded of how in the texts and classrooms it was insisted that sociology could be a positive natural science structured on the style of the exact sciences, and complying with the general rules applying to scientific methods of investigation. These rules are the same which, in his day, Durkheim had adopted from the experimental sciences and those popularized by Pearson (more recently by Popper) within the fixed schemes of scientific accumulation, validity, reliability, induction and deduction [4]. In essence, it was thought that the same concept of causality could be applied in natural science as in social science, and that there were analogous real causes in one as in the other, which could be disclosed in an experimental or controlled manner.

The field work particularly during the first stage, reflected this positivistic orientation which expressed itself consciously in the application of certain formal techniques, and unconsciously in that methods, by virtue of their origin in the conventional paradigms,

impeded our understanding of how they deformed analysis.

The major perplexity which led to the break with the normal paradigms sprung from the study of social movements. These, according to positivistic canons, can be responses to impulses applied to determined sectors of the social system. Or, they can be the effects of pathological situations susceptible to improvement at their sources, be they individual or group. Thus, campaigns of social reform initiated by the dominant bourgeoisie such as community action, civil defense, charity and the granting of family sized farms could be theoretically justified. These were all campaigns which were carried out within the existing sociopolitical context.

However, a more intense and independent study of economic and social problems brought to light a network of causes and effects only explicable through structural (not structuralist) analysis which departed from the habitual mechanistic and organicist guidelines, that is, from the paradigm in force. It became evident that the principles of causality as applied in the natural sciences could not be utilized here due to the fact that the basic material at issue belongs to a distinct ontological category with its own qualities [6]. "Facts" and processes of a circular or spiral nature were encountered, linked in open systems which reinforced their own development, often as self-fulfilling prophecies. Forms of cause-and-effect were found, not evident in nature where closed systems predominate and where the principle of action and reaction is simpler and more direct [7]. In any case, a universe of action related to causes which the current paradigm did not appropriately anticipate was brought to light, or perhaps more correctly, left in the twilight of knowledge.

It was precisely this "twilight" which was the most interesting with respect to fieldwork, and it demanded our attention. We rediscovered, concretely, the Hegelian principle: "The living do not allow the cause to reach its effect" [8].

Hence, previously known social dimensions of multiple causality, circularity and self-fulfillment were combined with an element of volition; we had to take into account that which is accidental or fortuitous, particularly at junctures such as those experienced in the regions where this active experimentation was conducted.

Here we are not dealing with blind or mechanical fate subject to mathematical rules in a homogeneous universe which may apply to the "exact" sciences, or at least represents a certain image or model of them, but with a human element of chance conditioned by former trends or limited to a certain feasibility in the options for action. The immediate antecedent to an action is volitional. The action does not move in a single direction, but instead has multiple determination within the process or frame from which it acquires its character [9]. Multiple determination, with a range of options at a given time (possibilities which cease as others open up) explains why history does not repeat itself, why processes are not inevitable. Within medium or short term historical trends, all is possible, and the future, so to speak then takes care of itself. Multiple determination and volition cause fluctuations – the advances, leaps and backward movements observed in reality. Hence, the existence of concrete protagonists and the singular twists they imposed on the campaigns of organized, basic groups in the regions.* In this manner, the ultimate nature of the relationship between tactic and strategy (a conscientious building of history towards the future), can also be understood. This is a problem which arose daily in field work, but one which researchers were unable to comprehend, much less manage, given its implications.

The problem of causality led us to question the orientation of the regional field work and the analytical tools being utilized. Up to this

*Reference to all types of unions, committees, syndicates, cadres, etc. (grass roots).

point, routine had prevailed. Experience later showed that a validation of the purpose of this work could only be definitely established by means of the criterion of concrete action, that is, the ultimate cause has both a theoretical and practical dimension. Chance, as applies to the social action witnessed from day to day, remained, finally, framed by praxis, as shall be explained further on.

(B) On Verification of Knowledge

In a similar manner, another break with the normal paradigm was brought about by a transfer of notions on scientific verification from the natural to the social sciences.

One prime aspect is that of experimental observation. Unlike the natural observer, the social observer himself forms part of the universe of observation. This special condition had been obscured by positivistic canons of "objectivity" and "neutrality" in science. Consequently, certain field research techniques such as "participant observation" and "participant experimentation", as practiced by anthropologists, maintained the distance between the observer and the observed. Moreover, these "neutral" techniques made the communities being studied victims of unilateral scientific exploitation [10].

As a possible alternative, "insertion into the social process" had been proposed in previous years. In this case, the researcher would fully identify with the people in contact, for the purpose of obtaining truthful information and contributing to the achievement of the goals for social indigenous change. This differed from the other techniques, since the protagonist role of the popular "masses" was recognized, and the role of the intellectual observer as controller and sole recipient of scientific information was diminished [11].

Secondly, although the aim of the research was to achieve superior "scientific" understanding through primary contact with these

popular, organized basic groups, the results obtained from this variation in the paradigm proved to be disappointing. The insertion of the researcher into the social process implied his subordination to political activities conditioned by expediency. And the knowledge gained was more a question of confirmation and verification than one of innovation or discovery. Although, as we shall see, common sense or popular knowledge are valuable and necessary as a basis for social action, it was hard to visualize how this could be articulated with the verifiable, scientific knowledge being sought in order to orient campaigns in defense of popular interests.

Finally, it was noted that the most verifiable and useful knowledge resulted from the abstract elaborations made in closed seminars, from the discussions held among colleagues of a similar intellectual level, and from a study of critical literature. Nothing new was learned in this sense, although the initial expectations of deriving scientific knowledge from direct contact with the organized, basic groups had been great.

(C) On Empiricism

Experience also verified that the conscientious researcher can be, at the same time, the subject and object of his own research; and, as a result, directly experiment with the effect of his work. However, he must emphasize one or the other of these roles within the process, doing so in a sequence in time and space which includes approaching and keeping distance from the groups, action and reflection in turn [12]. In searching for reality in the field, that which saves the researcher from remaining outside the process is his commitment to the organized masses, that is, his personal insertion. The masses, as active subjects, are therefore that which justifies the researcher's presence and his contribution to real tasks in the active and reflective phases.

Thus, given these conditions, there could

be no place in this work for traditional, social experimentation designed for the purpose of creating science and interpreting reality, without personal involvement in certain temporal-spatial action-reflection rhythms. These techniques were subordinate to the loyalties to the acting groups, and the resultant imperatives. It was of importance to keep in mind "for whom" work was being carried out. Therefore, empirical research techniques usually accepted by the classical school, such as the survey, questionnaire or interview, were not rejected because they were positivistic (only the extremists erroneously confused the empirical with the positivistic), but rather, these were given new meaning within the context of insertion into the acting groups. For example, there could be no decisive distinction between the interviewer and the individual being interviewed, as dictated in orthodox, methodological texts. The interview had to be transformed into an experience of participation, a dialogue, in which both parties identified themselves with respect to objectives shared. For this reason, the preliminary text prepared in 1974 ("Questions on Methodology") contains a chapter dedicated to popularizing empirical techniques of statistical measurement, quantification, analysis and organization of material judged to be vital in understanding reality at the local and regional levels.

This effort directed towards participation in research can be termed empirical in the correct sense, that is, in its attempt to adjust analytical tools to the real needs of the masses and not to those of the researcher [13]. Thus, techniques developed in the traditional social sciences obviously are not rejected in their entirety (as some persons pretended), but are utilized, perfected and converted into political and educational arms of the masses; the Colombian experience dealing with insertion (and self-investigation of communities) tends to demonstrate that this is possible. At any rate, empirical techniques derived from the

normal paradigm should be placed in their proper conformist context in order to recognize their limitations, that is, when they create a perfect divorce between the subject and the object of research and sustain the asymmetrical relations between interviewer and interviewee (as in opinion polls). Such techniques must, of course, be rejected when they are converted into ideological arms of the dominant class and provide the means of repression and control of the poor and exploited, as conventionally occurs.

(D) On Objective Reality

Positivistic guidelines demanded “cross sectional views” as approximations to reality, once again, an illogical imitation of the techniques of sampling developed in the exact sciences. In this fashion, measurable “facts” were derived with which the mosaic of society could be mentally reconstructed, piece by piece.

Without rejecting the importance of measurement in social activity when justified, it was seen that in the field these facts were cut off from their processual dimension. However, this temporal dimension did represent a fundamental part of the reality observed; the dynamic was precisely that which commanded the major attention of the researchers, for they had before them the objective reality of matter and movement which scientists seek as the ultimate cause of things [14].

Objective reality seemed to be “things-in-themselves” which moved in time and space resulting from a historically conditioned past. These converted themselves into “things-for-us” in reaching the level of understanding of concrete groups such as those found in the regions. This occurred with well-known processes such as exploitation, class organization and imperialism. For example, that which was empirically understood, or sensed, by farmers and Indians came to be rationally acknowledged, and ideologically as well as scientifically

articulated, for the first time by them, within its most realistic context. One of the peasant leaders who formally shaped their ideology, succeeded in explaining, in terms of “unconscious class struggle”, certain traditional behavior patterns of “terrajeros” (sharecroppers), a class to which he belonged. The memory of the existence of a regional peasant organization almost half a century ago, reappeared as “our thing” once translated into the language of actual confrontations, and when the old leaders were placed again into the living historical process.

This transformation of “things-in-themselves” into “things-for-us” is, according to Lenin, “precisely that which is knowledge” [15]. The level of knowledge as applied to objective reality within the regions in which we worked increased somewhat, that is, the transformation occurred. However, this effort directed towards searching for and creating true knowledge remained frustrated, in part, by the conscious or unconscious utilization of conceptual tools of the current paradigm. The problem of the transformation of “things-in-themselves” into “things-for-us” in order to understand objective reality was only solved when, at the same time, traditional ideas held on the validity of laws, the function of concepts, and the use of definitions in science were questioned. The principle of limited chance with which we re-examined processes of causality did much to transform fixed ideas on the heuristic and conceptual framework of the social sciences, as we shall now see.

(E) On Concepts

Social scientists tend to put laws and concepts into absolute terms and to convert definitions into dogmas, or make a fetish of theory. This occurred during the research, the result being a faulty and blurred version of reality. For lack of clarity in frames of reference and conceptual rigidity, many researchers wanted to confront laws as they “operated”

in the field such as “the increased reproduction in capitalist expansion” and the “relation between the structure and the superstructure”; to easily apply concepts such as self-management (*autogestion*) and colonialism; and to confirm broad definitions such as middle sector, *latifundium* and dependence. In practice, of course, these turned out to be half-baked, distorted and sometimes contradictory. In the case of definitions, many were found to be tautological or impossible to comprehend without being given their true experimental-historical components, and little was gained analytically [16].

This bad situation for theory testing was made worse as a result of obsessive effects resulting from slogans and pre-fabricated doctrines presumably operating under their own set of laws, concepts and absolute definitions which were imposed by certain political groups tied to popular movements existing in the regions. It was all too easy to adopt interpretations from other periods, social formations and political conjunctures distinct from the reality found in those regions. And this, in the end, could not be politically or theoretically constructive: there is ample agreement on the point [17].

However, we are not verifying anything new. The concepts, definitions and laws, although necessary in order to relate observed reality to theory, and to establish vectors of reality, do have a limited value restricted to fixed contexts. As Rickert said, “We cannot gather or take away from concepts more than what we have put into them”, and with these “we can do no more than build bridges across the overflowing river of reality, though faulty be the spans of those bridges” [18]. Marx had already suggested that each historical period can have its own laws [19]. And Lenin had written that, “law is little more than an approximate truth made up of relative truths” [20]. Thus, dogmatism must remain censured by its works.

Since it did not appear appropriate to work with stable or permanent concepts which always describe facts as “correct, complete and objective”, alternative theoretical solutions had to be sought in order to reach reality with the intention of both knowing and transforming it. The most adequate solution came from the dialectical method as applied in complementary and alternating steps, thus: (1) initiating an exchange between known or pre-conceived ideas and facts (or perceptions of the same) with adequate observations in the social milieu; (2) continuing with action at a local level so as to confirm in the milieu that which was to be conceptualized; (3) returning to reflect upon the experimental whole in order to detect more adequate ideas or shed more light on old concepts or theories so as to adapt them to the real context; and (4) returning to the beginning of the research cycle so as to concretize it in the climax action. These steps and rhythms came to be carried out in an endless manner, as we shall see [21].

It is known that this dialectical mode of work can prevent new categories from accommodating themselves to old thought patterns. This is indispensable in creating new paradigms [22], and occurs even in the natural sciences where data are conditioned by the social environment in which they originate. This then requires *ad hoc* treatments which may illuminate those areas not covered by existing paradigms, in order to direct attention to obscure portions of theoretical explanations currently in force that can be extensive and significant [23].

In the Colombian cases, many of the *ad hoc* treatments were derived from an incomplete historical materialist analysis. However, we attempted not to allow ourselves to become enslaved by its most specific concepts or common definitions, although, there existed the “danger” that some of us would be called “revisionists”, as in fact did occur.

(F) On Critical Social Science

In this limited effort to acquire an understanding which would be both valid and useful, another factor arose, not new but reiterative: the dimension of the “fact” as a historical process and reality as a “complex of processes”. We reaffirmed that in a social situation there can be no reality without history. “Facts” must make up “trends”, though these be distinct categories in classical logic [24].

As was to be expected, trends or processes appeared simply as successive events which were valid with respect to immediate contexts. They could be linked one to the other in order to give direction to a change, or sense to a social transformation of major scope. For example, there was a trend, in land seizures, towards challenging the basis of the traditional, latifundistic structure. In turn, this challenge could succeed in rearranging the foundations of local and regional political power. Since understanding such trends was not possible without submerging oneself in history, no one could consider himself qualified to project them towards the future without understanding the processes through which they had emerged from the immediate and more distant past.

The definitive addition of history to this scheme for comprehending objective reality (a conviction which, in truth, came from the first studies done in Saucio in 1955 and Boyaca in 1957) ended by breaking the paradigm in force and the identity of the positivistic and academic sociology. It seemed no longer possible to transform academic sociology, from within, into a revolutionary instrument because it had been conceived (in Colombia) in terms of the class and power interests of the dominant bourgeoisie. It could not be expected to render its own death blow. In the regions studied, there was felt a need for sociology to be above all a social science inspired by the interests of the working classes and the exploited; a “popular science” as it was called in the

beginning, which would be of greater use in analyzing the class struggle documented in the field, as well as in the political action of the working classes as the ultimate actors in history.

It was necessary that this new social science be integrated with various disciplines, not only with sociology, nor with it as a general base. As had been demonstrated during other periods and at some length by many adequate studies, it was historical materialism, as a philosophy of history, which provided the culminating point of unification [25]. With historical materialism, Lukács said, it was possible to “reveal the essence of the capitalistic social order and to pierce the disguise of the bourgeoisie with the cold rays of science so as to uncover the circumstances of the class struggle, the real circumstances.” Thus, historical materialism was both a scientific guide and a revolutionary tool [26].

Other disciplines joining sociology and history on this level were economics, geography, psychology, anthropology, political science and law. These eventually formed what was known in the 19th century as “political economics” but with elements of “critical theory” which Marx and Engels, as leading figures, added in their work and political praxis. These elements had been taken up by other social scientists, among them certain members of the “Frankfurt School” during the decades of the 1950’s and 1960’s, as well as by Marxists of different nationalities for many years. Thus, a “critical social science” was taking form. It was not new, but present necessity compelled us to use it with unusual intensity [27].

Initially, the limited groups involved in these experiments were unable to coherently voice their position regarding this alternative paradigm of critical social science [28]. However, based on former experiences and information from Colombia and other countries, they sensed the direction in which this research effort could move. As they advanced, it became apparent that the challenge was truly epistemological in

that they had to understand, in depth, the theoretical, practical and philosophical implications of what was termed, with a certain innocent enthusiasm, as “action research”.

PRAXIS AND KNOWLEDGE

It obviously became necessary to substitute the initial scientific structure of the research with another more suited to real needs and to the nature of the concrete tasks in those regions.

I have already indicated how this alternative scientific paradigm was being formed methodologically and in the conception of reality. The adoption of historical materialism as a scientific guide and revolutionary tool represented a step in this direction. Yet, the central idea around which the basis for this alternative paradigm crystallized was that of the possibility for the masses of workers themselves to create and possess scientific knowledge; that social research and political action can be synthesized and mutually influential so as to increase the level of efficiency of action as well as the understanding of reality [29]. Taking into consideration that “the criterion for correction of thought is, of course, reality”, the ultimate criterion of validity of scientific knowledge then came to be the dialectical unit formed by theory and practice in which practice is cyclically determinant [30].

The discovery of praxis as an element governing the validity of regional field work was not, in any case, the basis for a new, general paradigm in the national social sciences given that this discovery (as stated above) came much earlier and, in effect, had been applied in diverse contexts within and outside of the country. The “new” paradigm was old according to other criteria. That which was lacking in this case was an attempt to better comprehend, and to open up additional possibilities for applying it to, the Colombian revolutionary potential, defined by the diverse social and

political organizations which could justifiably adopt it [31].

I am not, of course, referring to the Aristotelian definition of “praxis” as action or movement to acquire fairness and justice in the formation of character, but that which is defined as political action aimed at structurally changing society. Its source is Hegel’s discovery that activity as labor is the original form of human praxis – man as the creation of his own toil – a discovery later developed by Marx as “instrumental action” or productive activity which regulates the material exchange of the human species with its natural environment [32].

The principle of the original praxis, brought to the field of knowledge as relationship between theory and practice, crystallizes in eight of the eleven “Theses on Feuerbach” (1888), particularly in the second and eleventh. These “Theses” of Marx may be considered, at a philosophical level, as the first formal pronouncement of the new paradigm of critical social science committed to action as a means of transforming the world, as opposed to the positivistic paradigm which interprets praxis as merely technological manipulation and rational control of the natural and social processes [33].

Within the context of regional field work, what was considered “theory” meant preconceived or preliminary ideas or exogenous information, related to “things-in-themselves”, processes, events or trends observed in reality, as explained above. “Practice” meant the application of principles or information gained through observation, application carried out, primarily, by organized, basic groups as actors and controllers of the process. The researchers shared with these groups information and the contingencies of field work.

These steps could be taken in an almost simultaneous manner or following the reflection-action rhythm with successive approaches and separations, as already noted. The idea

was to stimulate an interchange between concepts and acts, embracing adequate observation and experience, in determining the validity of that observed; return to reflection, according to the results of practice; and, the bringing forth of pre-conceptions or *ad hoc* statements at a new level, on which the rhythmic cycle of action research could be reinitiated *ad infinitum*.

Although these principles could not be applied in full for several reasons still to be considered, this experimental mode of work produced certain advances in the scientific construction of reality, as well as in the political action of the interested basic groups, thus demonstrating the certainty of the praxis in determining the validity of the studies, and the possibilities for developing the alternative paradigm of a critical social science. Several examples will illustrate this process:

1. The hypothesis of the "cultural arm" as a mobilizing element of the masses had been expounded and applied by Vietnamese revolutionary organizations, among others [34]. In Colombia, this hypothesis had not been put into practice, neither in a firm nor large scale manner, this being due, in part, to a feeling (erroneous in our view) that the "cultural front" with its indigenous, artistic and intellectual expressions would be of little importance in the struggle against imperialism and the bourgeoisie.

With preliminary information on the Vietnamese experience, it was decided to encourage the "cultural front" in a region where popular music held a strong foothold. As a result of this attempt, groups were formed which altered traditional, romantic music giving it a content of revolutionary protest which was intended to help mobilize and politicize the masses of peasant workers in that region.

At the same time, a greater comprehension of the origin, feeling and true history of this music as conceived by the people who sang and interpreted it, (not by the bourgeoisie who danced it), was attained. In this manner,

a few classic schemes of national cultural history were broken.

2. The hypothesis of "critical, historical recovery" leads to a study of the development of past class struggles. This examination draws from these struggles (for present ends) elements which were useful to the working class in its confrontations with the dominant classes. The critical period from 1918 to 1929, a time when the first Colombian syndicates were formed, was practically a mystery to Colombian historians as well as to political organizations. This mystery did not begin to be solved until one of the major leaders of the time, Juana Julia Guzmán, a woman in her eighties, verified the revival of the peasant struggle in 1972 and joined it once again. Previously, she had resisted giving any information to bourgeois and liberal historians who had gone to her with this end in mind. With the incorporation of Juana Julia into the peasant movement, the first credible data on the role of anarcho-syndicalism in the early Colombian syndicates, and the related origin of the socialist party in the country were obtained. These data were published in an illustrated pamphlet which, for a time, was the only documented source of information on this important Colombian political development. Simultaneously, the recovery of this period of struggles and of one of its old leaders, gave historical continuity and greater ideological and organizational impulse to the peasant (*usuario*) movement between 1972 and 1974, projecting it into a vanguard position recognized throughout the country.

3. The theory of "class violence and struggle", as a widely known historical constant, was put to the test in a region of Colombia, with similar pedagogical and political results. With this theory in mind, it was discovered that at the beginning of the century, a diocese had usurped the land of an Indian reservation in order to build a seminary. Historical research on this subject in archives and offices of notaries public — as well as in the field — led

not only to the confirmation of this theory, and enrichment of knowledge as to the region and its history seen in the perspective of the class struggle; but also provided the indigenous movement with the formal weapons and ideological and political knowledge necessary to confront the bishop and recover the land by force. This represented a major victory for the Colombian popular classes.

In each of these cases, the validity of knowledge was determined by the objective results of social and political practice, and not through subjective estimations [35]. Thus the fortuitous remained encircled by concrete action and pertinent knowledge in that there was some control in the flow of contingencies, which would have not been possible in another form. These cases had previous or exogenous theoretical referents, several of them based on experiences and specific reflections from other regions. This, however, does not invalidate the possibility of creating absolutely original knowledge in the same manner. At any rate, it is possible that, in these cases, scientific knowledge was created and obtained through mass action itself. This became the general heritage of the organized basic groups, with particular reference to critical social science. At the same time, the popular struggle was fed by such knowledge, thus making options available in certain historical moments. From this it can again be maintained that praxis has a definitive force, and that to tie theory to practice in the environment of radical or revolutionary change is neither as difficult nor as complex as it seems in our milieu [36].

However, there remains one question to be solved in this respect — the role of the grass roots organization in obtaining and utilizing knowledge and in exercising the praxis. Without such organizations, things would have not gone so far, data of sufficient depth would not have been obtained, nor would these have had the political utility and impact achieved. Yet, much depended upon the type of organization

and the nature of relationships established between researchers and the organized basic groups, a theme to which I now turn.

POPULAR WISDOM AND POLITICAL ACTION

If it is admitted that the praxis of validation, as conceived here, is above all political, the problem of action research must weigh the relationship between researchers and the popular bases through which political work develops. This is a fundamental aspect of the research method for, as has been said, the object is to produce knowledge which is relevant to social and political practice; nothing is studied for its own sake. Since concrete action is developed at a grass roots level, it is necessary to comprehend the ways in which this action feeds research and the mechanisms through which the study, in turn, is perfected and completed through contact with the base.

In action research it is highly important to recognize and appreciate the role played by popular wisdom, common sense and working class culture so as to obtain and create scientific knowledge on the one hand; and, on the other, recognize the role of the parties and other political or union organizations as controllers and receptors of research work, and as historical protagonists. This implies a number of imperatives, as follows:

1. Studying the reciprocal relationships between common sense, science, communication and political action.
2. Examining the interpretation of reality from the point of view of the proletariat, according to "specific mediating categories."
3. Studying how subject and object combine themselves in research practice, and recognizing the political consequences of this combination.

We shall now analyze each of these three procedures with respect to the Colombian experience.

(A) On Common Sense

Some of the regional researches were initially inspired by a sentimental conception of “people”, to the point of being inclined to view their opinions and attitudes as revolutionary truth. This erroneous tendency to believe that “the masses are never wrong” came from political schools of thought in which a personal identification of students and intellectuals with the masses was emphasized, identification which demanded obvious demonstrations of commitment such as callouses on the hands and a Franciscan lifestyle in tune with the poverty of the slums and rural villages in which work was carried out. In practice, this populist masochism led nowhere, nor was it an effective way of linking oneself with the working masses; it was not intellectually or humanly honest, and by falling into an extremist “objectivity” corresponded to the mentality of the petty bourgeoisie [37].

However, evidently as a reaction to the sterile, academic intellectualism from which many researchers emerged, it was sought to test the scientific potential of their liaison with the bases, creating reference groups composed of peasants, workers and Indians [38]. Their aim was to reduce the gap between manual and intellectual labor so that the workers, peasants and Indians would not continue to be spiritually subjugated by the intellectuals. The most advanced cadres were to be encouraged, in order that they might assume at least some of the research and analytical techniques which were considered to be the monopoly of the technicians and bureaucrats.

Since there did not exist complete clarity with respect to ideological orientation in fieldwork, with the exception of a diffuse idea of sharing the search for proletarian consciousness with the masses, jealousies sprang up revealing that this type of work by “independent intellectuals” was ineffective and egotistical since it relegated to a secondary

level organized, political cadres (militant researchers). These difficulties impeded the full realization of the very methodological principles, which impelled those in search of “union” with the masses.

The first inspiration of this type of work, perhaps poorly interpreted, led in another direction: not that of competing with the parties or their cadres but rather towards aiming at direct pedagogical and political experience with the working classes. Gramsci’s thesis that it is necessary to “destroy the prejudice of philosophy as something of great difficulty for dealing with an activity that belongs to a certain specialized category of academicians” provided the origin for this inspiration. Like Gramsci, it was felt that there exists a “spontaneous philosophy” within language (as a combination of knowledge and concepts), common sense and in the system of belief or folklore which, although incoherent and disperse, are of value in articulating the praxis at a popular level. Gramsci pointed out that a major weakness of the political left was “its not knowing how to create ideological unity between those above and those below (as had been done in the Catholic Church), between the simple and the intellectuals”. This point of view seemed to be of great importance in breaking with academic tradition and implementing the intellectuals’ commitment. In addition, for Gramsci “all philosophy tends to convert itself into the common sense of an environment which is in itself restricted (that of all intellectuals)”. This came to provide a sense of relativity to the problem and strengthened the researchers’ previous decision to link themselves to the masses in the regions [34].

Of course, neither the researchers nor Gramsci tried to introduce a new science into the individual lives of the masses. They wanted to give critical utility to already existing activity, making the “philosophy of the intellectuals” truly reflect the realities found, analogous to a culmination of the advancement of common

sense. For, as stated by Gramsci himself, common sense involves a serious element of causality which develops itself in, perhaps, a more exact and immediate manner than that offered by profound, philosophical judgments or by sophisticated technical observations. Important previous cases were examined. These were based on the transformation of daily experiences into philosophical or scientific knowledge; such as those of Kant, for example, whose Newtonian interpretations as expressed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, are marked by a rationality which was none other than the common sense of his time [40]; or of Galileo whose "theory of impetus" as stated in early writings on mechanics (*De Motu*) was an expression of the common opinion on movement as of the 15th century [41].

Let us study how the principle of common sense was applied to the reality of regional field work in Colombia. We should remember again that this work was experimental and preliminary.

Above all, it was essential to take into account the knowledge and experienced opinions of the cadres and other informed individuals. This related, above all, to regional, socioeconomic problems and their priorities, in which the researchers' trust was compensated for in excess. There existed a wealth of information on: the peasant experience in the organization of concrete action, e.g. land seizures; in the interpretation of agriculture as a technique and as a way of life; on the adoption of customs and new practices within a traditional environment; and, on the utilization of botany, herbology, music and drama in a specific, regional context. In these activities, as in others, many more successes were recorded than failures. This confirmed the secular belief in intellectual possibilities and in the creative powers of the common people.

Then, there was the problem of how to reach the masses with ideas and information; and how to illustrate or modify popular common sense so as to convert it into "good sense"

(Gramsci). According to what has already been explained, action research is not defined by the accumulation of data which leads to the discovery of laws or principles of pure science, nor do action oriented scholars develop theses or doctoral dissertations for their own sake. Neither, do they carry out research so as to initiate reforms, necessary through they may appear; nor to maintain the *status quo*. Action research works to ideologically and intellectually arm society's exploited classes in order that they may assume their conscious roles as actors in history. This is the ultimate destination of knowledge, that which validates the praxis and fulfills the revolutionary commitment.

As much of this information originated with the masses in the field, an attempt was made to restore this knowledge to them. This restitution could not take just any form, but had to be ordered and systematized, although without arrogance. In this, an attempt was made to follow the well known Maoist principle of "from the masses to the masses" (see note 11). Attention was also given to the Vietnamese experience in the use of popular culture for revolutionary ends [42].

This principle of "systematic restitution" was the one which released more energies and excited the most controversy, perhaps because it deals with obvious elements which, despite their importance, had been subordinated by many syndicates and political organizations. For to insure that what one does, writes or says is understood can mean the difference between the success or failure of a political or social movement. Even an illustrious philosopher such as Fichte was preoccupied with communicating his ideas and did not find it inconvenient to "translate" several of his complicated treatises so as to "force the reader to understand", with, as he himself said, "an explanation clear as the light of day, within the reach of the general public" (1801).

Efforts to communicate meant, at least,

to recognize possibilities for the masses to comprehend new ideas. If all men are not formal philosophers, at least spontaneous ones abound, said Gramsci. In the Colombian cases, the problem was rooted in how to reach the masses, not with the journalistic or educational information with which they had been sufficiently bombarded, but with that knowledge formative of a revolutionary class consciousness that could dissolve the alienation preventing them from comprehending reality and articulating their collective struggle and defense [43].

Consequently, activities were experimentally designed to break, however partially, the cultural barrier with peasants, workers and Indians. The principles and techniques of communication in the Colombian situation had to be very carefully conceived since the level of political and educational development of the grass roots was very low. A previously noted rule was applied, that of beginning to work at the level of political consciousness of the masses so as to successively bring them to "good sense" and revolutionary class consciousness. This enormous task remained indecisive on the regional and national levels for a variety of reasons; the most important of these was the fact that active researchers as such could not assume the role of a political vanguard, although there was no other cadre to step into the breach.

Nevertheless, the pedagogic and political experience gained momentum in certain locations.

In the first place, in view of the wider recognition of the importance of doing research in order to expedite and improve the practices of political and unionized groups, regional historical and socioeconomic studies were encouraged (Atlantic Coast, Pacific Littoral, Cauca, Antioquia, Valle). Themes included the origin of the latifundium, the conformation of the peasant classes, history of rural communities, histories of popular movements, the

educational problem, and factors in state repression and violence.

These studies were proposed and conceived in consultation with the organized, basic groups, particularly with their more advanced cadres. Popular experience, as already defined, the determining of priorities and goals, and the control of information were taken into consideration. The result was the publication of the following books (complexly conceived but simply written): *History of the Agrarian Question in Colombia* (1975), *Modes of Production and Social Formations in the Atlantic Coast* (1974), *The Indian Question*, by Ignacio Torres Giraldo (1975), *María Cano, Rebel Woman*, by the same author (1973), *In Defense of My People*, by Manuel Quintín Lame (1972), *Por ahí es la cosa* (1972), and others.

Moreover with the assistance of the more advanced cadres at the local level, illustrated pamphlets deriving from the same field work were prepared and published (*Lomagrande*, *Tinajones*, *El Boche*, etc.). They were also easy to read and comprehend. Thus, the masses were, for all practical purposes, the first to know the results of the research undertaken. In order to maintain this impulse, necessary techniques and knowledge were transmitted to the members of the cadres. Later, short courses, manuals, audiovisual materials, brief films ("*Mar y pueblo*", "*La hora del hachero*", etc.), slides, educational recordings, and, finally regional and local musical and theatrical groups were put to the service of disseminating the research results.

Further, in 1974 a national magazine of political opposition was launched: "*Alternativa*". Its purpose was to broaden contacts with the masses so as to include sections of the Colombian petty bourgeoisie and middle classes. The phenomenal success of this magazine (it grew in five months to become the second largest in the country, with 52,000 copies) indicated that a good way had been found to politicize at least the middle sectors.

Important leftist groups cooperated in this effort. But the desire to intensify the contact with the grass roots at the expense of the middle sectors sparked a noisy national crisis, with ugly personal overtones. This was not a positive move for the advancement of the causes that the cooperating groups favored: the magazine suffered various schisms and then a halt in production [44].

Thus the “Alternativa” experience of communicating with the grass roots through journalistic media did not help much in overcoming the alienation and ignorance of all parties involved in the search for “good sense” and revolutionary class consciousness. There was rampant “cannibalism”, and utter confusion with reference to the goals of the magazine in relation to the interests of those responsible for it.

However, by means of special short courses and the popularized text “*Questions on Methodology*” (1974) the cadres were gradually given the more convenient and simple techniques applying to social and economic research. These were put within their reach so as to permit them to develop and sustain, indefinitely, and as fully as possible, their own studies with a minimum of systematization and analysis, and, without the necessity of having to resort to outside advice or assistance. This community self-investigation partially resolved the living problem of the control of, and the “for whom” of research.

Finally, as noted, respecting all projects and levels, an attempt was made to adopt a direct, clear and simple language with which results could be communicated. This, then, demanded a revision of concepts and definitions, a struggle against scientific academic formality and specialized jargon. This led to the design of new types of publications and more open, less esoteric forms of intellectual production.

The popular reference groups originally cited as an alternative to academicians and intellectuals (see note 37) were made up of

cadres with experience and certain analytical skills. However, their influence proved to be more practical than theoretical, more political than scientific. Although these groups were useful enough, stricter theoretical discussion had to continue to be developed among professionals identified with the research work to whom the impressions or common sense of the masses were transmitted.

In spite of the great difficulties encountered, these activities were, in some respects, rather awesome. But their development was marked above all by a lack of political understanding which could have been foreseen by remembering the charges made against “voluntarist” work. The major difficulty in the deployment and interpretation of these elements of education, communication and politization arose as a result of neglecting the dialectical process implied in the praxis, namely, the transmission to the popular masses of ideological principles to order their experience, thus permitting them to advance in transforming their world [45]. In other words, the masses involved in this work advanced ideologically but not sufficiently so, because the philosophy and knowledge flowing from this action research were not adequately translated into an illustrated, ordered and coherent form of common sense, into the “good sense”, which could lead to a higher level of political action. Information was gathered for the people, scientific data were obtained, there were publications, and certain mass movements were promoted; yet the work did not climax in superior structures or in more ambitious tasks of social transformation.

It was impossible to realize such superior, ambitious work in the manner implied by action research because local groups were impermanent and lacked political resources in depth. From the beginning they had been, as spontaneous cadres, rather loose. Nor was it possible fully to combine this work with that of existing revolutionary parties — although there were several positive attempts — due to

a mutual lack of trust which later proved to be irrational.

Even so, what little was accomplished in this pedagogico-political field demonstrated the importance of examining the convictions of the masses and their leaders so as to urge them to act, and to act with efficiency. This appeared to be a pertinent way of converting “class psychology”, of helping to change the “class in itself” into a “class for itself” [46]. And we are unaware of any better way of converting common sense into scientific knowledge, or of infusing it with the dynamic elements necessary to political advancement. In this area, the challenge continues, but it is a challenge which applies more to the revolutionary parties than to committed intellectuals individually [47].

(B) On the Science of the Proletariat

When these experiments in action research were initiated in 1970, at the time of the initial rejection of the positivistic sociological and academic tradition, a distinction began to be made between “bourgeois science” and “science of the proletariat” in the critical manner customary for leftist intellectuals. It was evident that the prevailing interpretation of reality, in Colombia, was and continues to be, that of the dominant bourgeoisie; from the end of the 18th century, this has been combined with the triumph of the liberal political movements made possible by the industrial revolution. This elementary observation led to the conclusion that such interpretations of reality are conditioned by class interests, that is, by mediating historical forces which catalyze events in reality. Studying the way in which the bourgeoisie carried out their revolution, including their science as a reinforcing element, it could be deduced that it is possible to form a countersociety in which the determining social class would be, by historical definition, the proletariat. It is then logical to conclude that the proletariat, as a class, can also develop

and impose its own system of interpreting reality, including its own science.

Through the various revolutionary experiences (e.g. Cuban, Chinese, Soviet, Vietnamese) it was known that this science had to be conceived as an answer to the contradictions of capitalism, an answer also generating ideological forces capable of negating such contradictions. There is no other perspective adequate to meet this end than that proposed by historical materialism. The effective development of this concept has been and is, as we maintain, the critical social science. Since historical materialism, as a philosophy of history, demands that knowledge be combined with action it is, in fact, the same as action. Therefore, it is the task of today’s proletariat to advance the struggle in which theory and practice coincide, a thesis which was accepted as valid in our study of the concept of praxis [48].

How to define and determine the proletariat as actor in history, including the intellectuals who were to adopt the proletarian ideology, was a constant problem in our work. It was impossible to solve. There were groups, in the countryside and in the city, which objectively belonged to the proletariat. With these, close contact was established. The researchers wanted to recognize and respect the wisdom and common sense of these groups in order to determine if their own science could be developed. This did not give palpable results. Clearly, there was an interpretation of history and society as seen by peasants and workers taken from the innermost recesses of the working class, from the memories of their elders, from oral tradition and from the materials of their own family coffers and trunks that differed from the bourgeois interpretation found in history textbooks. There were exciting cases in which diverse peasant cadres were able to mold their new ideological concepts into writing. These had a positive effect in the politization and creation of proletarian consciousness among other comrades, and served to delineate a “popular

science” as conceived in 1972.

However, in general, the voice of the masses had a conventional accent reflecting the weight of the alienation to which they had been subjected under the capitalistic system. There were, consequently, individuals educated in, and corrupted by, the capitalist society. Even those cadres considered to be among the most advanced often demonstrated a lack of clear consciousness with respect to their role in history, and lacked the capacity to voice their own scientific interpretation of their own reality, or project it into the future.

Thus, with characteristic impatience, it was the action researchers and their intellectual allies who were forced to define “popular science” in contrast to that of the bourgeoisie, and inject their own definition of it into the context of reality. It was as if in looking for ghosts, for lack of one, they created their own. The result was a special application of the notion of insertion into the social process in order to “place knowledge at the service of popular interests”; but such knowledge did not derive from the objective conditions of the proletariat as would have been theoretically more correct [49]. Nevertheless, they succeeded in proposing and applying cooperative guidelines for research with proletarian groups in the field, these groups could advance, slowly, towards a solution to the problem.

In any case, the orientation (and validation) of both field work and the scientific task continued to be that of historical materialism and the praxis thereby implied. As historical materialism was almost the exclusive heritage of action researchers and committed intellectuals, they consequently had to diffuse it among the grass roots as an ideology. This led to the adoption as “specific mediating categories” of what, in a classic manner, are expounded upon as general Marxist postulates. In this manner, what was termed “popular science” had to be an ideological replica of certain general theses of historical materialism

as developed in other contexts and social formations. This is to say that the groups fell victim to the worst historical form of dogmatism, that of mimesis [50]. This transfer of given concepts and categories turned out to hit, by chance, upon certain real issues while missing others. In practice, it was not felt as though “the science of the proletariat” had been enriched, for that which was anticipated as “popular science” did not succeed in faithfully reflecting the objective realities encountered because of the dogmatic mimesis. In fact, this dogmatism distorted or obscured reality as in discussions held amongst the researchers and with others on the role and functions of the revolutionary vanguard, the dogma of the five modes of production, the survival of feudalism in Colombia and its relationship to the social formation, economic determinism and the characterization of society, and so on, all of which seemed like conversations with the deaf.

Such an ambiguous result could have been foreseen. The social-historical condition of the Colombian masses still does not make it possible to constitute the autonomous scientific and cultural complex of the working classes (*vis à vis* that of the bourgeoisie), as an act of historical substance, capable of constructing the future by anticipating practical results, or capable of comprehending the concrete reality of the present and thus, visualizing the future. There was no need to create illusions about the people with which the researchers were working (although they tended to idealize such people). The options remained too conditioned by the established system. In effect, the revolution is not a question of one day; and the human failings of the masses and their cadres were painfully in evidence [51].

Thus, this experience in search of a “science of the proletariat” remained inconclusive. The hope that successive exchanges, contacts and educational efforts would diminish the effects of ignorance and alienation of the proletariat as well as that of the intellectuals, was more

frustrated than fulfilled. Such efforts, we had imagined, would enable the people to make a qualitative leap in constructing a science and liberating themselves politically [52]. Thus, the renewed responsibility of explaining and criticizing is, by virtue of praxis, that of the contemporary revolutionary cadres. As Hobsbawn noted, if the intellectuals are not necessarily decisive, nonetheless without them the working classes cannot make a revolution, much less a revolution directed also against the intellectuals [53].

(C) On Subject and Object of Knowledge

As we have seen, the paradigm of critical social science stipulates that the difference between subject and object can be reduced in the practice of research. The Colombian experience of action research tends to confirm this thesis, which is, in fact, not new. Hegel had already hypothesized how, in the idea of life, the dualism of subject and object is overcome by knowledge in a synthesis which succeeds in reducing the second to the first [54].

Consequently, the field work in the chosen Colombian regions was not conceived as mere experimental observation, or as simple observation utilizing the usual techniques (questionnaires, etc.). It was also a "dialogue" between mediating persons participating jointly in the research experience seen as vitally utilizing, in a joint manner, the information obtained, and preparing the publication of the results in tactical form for the movements involved [55].

This understanding among persons of different origin, training and, for the most part, social class was demonstrated when he who was considered to be better prepared altered the conception of his role — be it as cadre or researcher — and adopted an attitude of apprentice, of respect for the experience, knowledge and need of the other; at the same time he let himself be "expropriated" of his own knowledge and techniques. This process of

understanding had positive political consequences as verified in the field. In effect, when the actual level of consciousness of the situation encountered (that of the members of the basic communities) was taken into account as a starting point for action and not the level of the cadre itself (whose consciousness could be much further advanced than that of the masses), political errors caused by excessive activism or ignorance were avoided [56]. In addition, the researchers tried to avoid, at times without success, unilateral or hierarchical decisions with the scent of paternalism which, unintentionally, could have eventuated in new forms of intellectual and political exploitation of the masses, forms which everyone wished to avoid or combat at any risk.

The research thus conceived which was, in part, "self-investigation", led to an intellectual and political division of work which took into account levels of preparation, without injecting discrimination or arrogance into the cadres. For example, quantitative analysis was carried out by an advanced cadre, while the direct interview, recordings with old informants, the search for documents and photographs in family chests were developed by those cadres with lesser preparation. The complete participation of those interested in this work was essential; and the knowledge and control of research objectives by all concerned were indispensable, particularly for the union organizations. Thus it went in the field; in many situations, motivated by the nature of the struggle of which they were a part, it was not possible to proceed with studies nor to gain knowledge but for the dialogue that resulted when the differences between research subject and object were diminished.

Since the studies developed in this manner were not solely intellectual exercises, but were geared to immediate political practice, they could not be considered as the sole by-product of a synthesis between subject and object. Rather, they had to be viewed as an understanding between active subject and object,

sharing their experience within the same historical process, and at the same time acting as one subject. And, of course, the problem of the meaning of insertion in the historical process as a political effect on the masses and their organizations had always to be considered.

In general, our experience tended to show that it is possible to develop this type of study-action with individual researchers when they operate in the interests of the masses or, more specifically, with their unions. However, it is obvious that their political effect remains void when the work does not coincide with that of political parties or organizations, or when not directly sponsored or encouraged by their militant researchers. In view of the danger which this lack of definition could represent to group interests, such (occasional) departures brought accusations of "spontaneousness"; and party jealousy frequently exacerbated situations or unleashed "McCarthyism" and "cannibalism" against the cadres or researchers considered guilty.

This clash produced, on the one hand, by party sectarianism and, on the other, by the spontaneous individual haste to participate in the revolutionary process, put pressure upon our groups to respond politically to resultant impasse; that is, to establish themselves also as a political group. Although steps were taken in this direction, in the long run they failed for a variety of reasons: (1) differences over the orientation of the communication apparatus (particularly as applied to the magazine *Alternativa*) led to a dramatic division among the groups with adverse public effects; (2) the peasant and working masses were also affected by an internal division relating to tendentious and personalistic interpretations with respect to the regional work and the source of economic support (see note 51); (3) at the moment of decision, some of us opted to tip the scale and keep some distance, emphasizing the role of the committed scientist within the process and not that of the political pragmatist and

calculator as demanded by circumstances. At any rate, such dilemmas and political temptations merely confirmed the already accepted thesis of the basic importance of organization in theoretical and practical activities so as to develop the full revolutionary potential.

It is known, from the point of view of orthodox Marxist-Leninist principles that "the organization is the form of mediation between theory and practice" [57]. Therefore, it is the organization which must, in the final instance, direct the execution of research, including where and with whom, for that is what contextualizes options in tactics, and the play of contingency at historical junctures. Such a thesis is valid for those non-fetishistic organizations that consider research important. These may correctly apply the Leninist principle, "without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary action"; and the Maoist principle that "he who has not investigated has no right to give an opinion" [58]. Yet, in the Colombian case, it was felt frequently that there existed little more than rote recognition of such principles, and that almost all energies and organizational resources were dedicated to direct action. Such a solution, although respectable from certain points of view, did not appear to be advantageous to the revolutionary process in general, especially with respect to strategic aspects in the formation of a strong and ideologically firm countersociety. But, the process was teaching us. Successive blows from a class enemy better informed through study and scientific research led some activist groups and parties to reconsider their position. In these cases, experience in the Colombian milieu led to more mature ways of mediation between theory and practice, which can no longer ignore the methodological principles of action research and critical social science as outlined herein.

Delving into popular knowledge and exchanging experience with the masses stand out as necessary tactics. Common sense, and the formation of a public opinion conscious of its

true history, and based on class consciousness are essential to the constitution of an eventual science of the proletariat. The dialectics of subject-object in praxis goes to the heart of the problem, for it takes into account the social and political development of the masses.

Without the self-consciously organized masses, revolutionary change and the construction of the future are not possible, nor without them is it possible to acquire the scientific knowledge necessary for such vital tasks. However, for better or worse, this responsibility continues to fall to the specialized scientists. Evidently, they will be more consistent, efficient and productive scientists if they maintain the balance, the rhythm and the dialectic of communication with the people, and if the political organization encourages, admits and respects the scientists as such.

NOTES

- 1 Several Colombian institutions have developed action research since 1970. However, for diverse reasons, the most noted of these is the Fundación Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social (Rosca Foundation for Research and Social Action), (1970–1976) of which the author was a member. Among its more influential and widespread publications are: *People's Science, People's Cause* (Bogotá, 1972); *Methodological Questions Applied to the Social Sciences* (Bogotá, 1974 Mimeograph); *Truth is Revolutionary* (Bogotá, 1974); and "Rosca for Research Retires from Alternativa del Pueblo" Bogotá, no. 28 (March 17–April 30, 1975). Action research must be distinguished from militant research which is developed by scientific cadres within party lines and subject to the guidelines and necessities of party organization.
- 2 Orlando Fals Borda, *Autonomous Science and Intellectual Colonialism* (Mexico, 1970; Bogotá, 1976). On the paradigms of science, we have followed the theories of Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 23, 182–187, particularly in that which deals with the formation of knowledge and the constitution of new paradigms ("extraordinary science").
- 3 For example, see for Latin America: Aldo Solari, Rolando Franco and Joel Jutkowitz, *Theory, Social Action and Development in Latin America* (Mexico, 1976); Rosalía Cortés, ed., *Social Sciences: Ideology and National Reality* (Buenos Aires, 1970); Aníbal Quijano, "Alternatives to Social Sciences in Latin America", *Indoamerican Development*, Vol. 6, no. 21 (October, 1973), pp. 45–48; etc. In general: Jorge Graciarena, "Observers or Participants?" Ninth World Congress of Sociology, Toronto, 1974; and Tom Bottomore (ed.), *Crisis and Contention in Sociology* (London, 1975).
- 4 Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Burdeos, 1895); Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science* (London, 1892); Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York, 1959).
- 5 In effect, as Lukács points out, there was from the beginning a certain conditioning produced by the cognitive ideal of the natural sciences which, when applied to social development, became an ideological arm of the bourgeoisie; cf. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Barcelona, 1975), p. 12.
- 6 A principle which is obvious but so easy to forget, despite the definite and elementary reasons given by epistemologists such as Rickert when he speaks of "material opposition" (real) between nature and culture to explain the old distinction between "science and nature", and "science of the spirit" which came to recognize a "formal opposition" between the naturalistic method and the historical method which he considered as belonging to the cultural science; Henrich Rickert, *Cultural Science and Natural Science* (Buenos Aires, 1974), pp. 46–47. Cf. reservations on the same by Lucio Colletti, *Towards a Living Marxism* (Bogotá, 1976), pp. 37–38.
- 7 This thesis had already been emphasized by several schools of thought, and, since Marx, for the study of human society and culture, remembering the Preface to the first edition of *Das Kapital* in which Marx compared himself to physicists underlining the fact that society is not a "fixed crystal" but an entity which must "continually understand itself in the process of transformation." Cf. also his letter to Mikhailovsky on the historical method of research (1877).
- 8 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Buenos Aires, 1974), Vol. 11, pp. 497–498.
- 9 Such is the "principle of impulse" A–B adapted by Lenin in order to argue the thesis of J. Petzoldt for explaining the different options D, C, E which can take part in reality, that which would explain distinguishing between "the fortuitous and the necessary" in social action. V.I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empiricriticism* (Madrid, 1974), pp. 152–154. (My appreciation to René Zavaleta for calling my attention to this aspect of Leninist thought.)
- 10 We can place attempts of "action anthropology" proposed during the 1950's by Sol Tax in the same category; and, in part, the attempts at "ethnomethodology" carried out by H. Garfinkel, although of these it is worth examining practical premises which defy or condition the "normal science" of the era. See the article entitled "Ethnomethodology and Marxism" by Peter Freund and Mona Abrams, in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 3, no. 3 (Fall 1976), pp. 377–393.
- 11 Mao Tse-tung, "Several Questions on the Methods of Direction", *Selected Works* (Peking, 1968), Vol. III, p. 119.
- 12 Cf. Mao Tse-tung, "On Practice", *op. cit.*, 1968, Vol. I, p. 331; "To experience, to know, to experience again and to gain new knowledge. This form repeats itself in infinite cycles; with each cycle the contents of experience and knowledge raise themselves to the highest level. This is the dialectical materialistic theory of knowledge... and of the unity between knowing and acting."

- 13 There must be no confusion with respect to “blind empiricism”. This problem was clarified by Marx himself in 1880 in his “Workers Survey”. For example, suitable questionnaires can be political elements at the same time; elements of politization and creation of class consciousness, as Marx demonstrated in the phrasing of his questions. Cf. T.B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel (eds.), *Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (London, 1963), pp. 210–213.
- 14 This is an assumption as old as human knowledge, one first pronounced upon in Greek philosophy and later revived by Descartes. Today, it is confirmed by many philosophers and natural scientists. The same thesis was restated by Engels as the “law of movement” whose science is the dialectic in the development of nature, society and thought; Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Chicago, 1935), pp. 144–145. Cf. V.I. Lenin, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–166, 251. These principles are derived more from Aristotle than from Newton; however, they are not for this reason any less real or operative.
- 15 V.I. Lenin, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–111, 179. Lukács remembers that these Kantian categories when taken by Hegel, were not opposed but rather “necessarily correlated” in which he places in its proper context what, based on Engels, Lenin maintained. Lukács, *op. cit.*, 179; G.W.F. Hegel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 567, 579 (on reality).
- 16 It is possible that this is an intrinsic defect in all definition which makes it incorrigible when the frames of reference are changed. In this case, all must fall together with the definition. Cf. that which occurred in the physical sciences, according to T. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, pp. 183–184. Hegel had pointed out how definition “reduces the richness of multiple determination of intuitive existence to the most simple moments” as in other limitations which are frequently forgotten; G.W.F. Hegel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 700–701.
- 17 Cf. convergent analysis on the problem of the “lack of coincidence between radical political groups and the overall scientific vision of development, presented by Clovis Moura in *Sociology and the Praxis* (Mexico, 1976), p. 69. Fetishism is evident when groups of political parties begin to search, at any risk, for the “Winter Palace” everywhere, when they confuse the major enemy, when they simplify class analyses, sacrificing this to merely tactical ends, etc.
- 18 H. Rickert, *op. cit.*, pp. 69, 200; G.W.F. Hegel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 516, 700 (concept as accidental and immanent deduction). Cf. T. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 149, shows the weight of conceptual apparatus and of vocabulary in the reformulation of relationships in the new paradigms, with their consequent application to reality. Another critic reminds us that “concepts, like perceptions, are ambiguous and depend on the previous experiences of a person, his education, the general conditions of his environment, just as on vocabulary and observational language.” Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (Barcelona, 1974), pp. 66, 119, 125–126.
- 19 Karl Marx, Final words to the second German edition of *Das Kapital* (1873); and preface to the first German edition of *Das Kapital*, final part (1867). It must be underlined that Marx’s proposal was “to discover the economic law of movement of modern society”, and not a general or eternal law.
- 20 “Each phase of scientific development adds new grains to the sum total of absolute truth; but the limits of truth in each scientific thesis are relative, as broad as they are restricted by the subsequent progress of knowledge”. V.I. Lenin, *op. cit.*, pp. 125–126). However, Lenin (inspired by Engels) did not cease to uphold the existence of “objective laws” in nature, such as those applying to the seasons, yet, these are more causal processes or natural necessities. The theses on the absolute and relative truth were also adopted by Mao Tse-tung, “On Practice”, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 330.
- 21 G.W.F. Hegel, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 50 (introduction to the general concept of logic and dialectical method).
- 22 Cf. P. Feyerabend, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–40.
- 23 T. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 83, 152–153, 172; John D. Bernal, *Social History of Science* (Barcelona, 1976), Vol. I, pp. 415–417, 424–425.
- 24 To state the pure or empirically simple “facts” is to take reality out of context and abandon the dialectic method, maintains G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, pp. 236–239. The correct thing is to treat them as Rosa Luxemburg did in *Social Reform or Revolution?* where tendencies convert themselves into facts, for these in themselves “verify the process”. Cf. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. III, pp. 1, 316.
- 25 Cf. A. Labriola, *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* (London, 1948), pp. 149–152. Along the same lines as Rickert and others, we do not consider historical materialism as a science, but as a philosophy of history in which we believe ourselves to be faithful to the objectives of Marx, who, as is well known, only spoke of the “materialistic fundamentals” of his method of investigation (in reality the designation of the term is from Engels and not Marx); H. Rickert, *op. cit.*, p. 185. Also see Bottomore and Rubel (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 35–36; E. Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* (Paris, 1972), p. 26.
- 26 G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
- 27 Ernest Mandel, *The Leninist Theory of Organization* (Mexico, 1974), p. 61; H.C.F. Mansilla, *Introduction to the Critical Theory of Society* (Barcelona, 1970). Aldo Solari et al. (*op. cit.*, pp. 66–67), point, justifiably, to the “poverty of the epistemological discussion in Latin America” and the slight attention we give to contributions of the “Frankfurt School”, especially during the years of our discussion on “science, crisis and commitment” (1968–1970). In effect, only Marcuse was read, while other pertinent works such as those of Horkheimer and Habermas were only published in English and Spanish after 1970.
- 28 Thus, the general theses of Kuhn on formative guidelines in new scientific paradigms tend to be confirmed (T. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, pp. 84–85).

- 29 O. Fals Borda, *Ciencia Propia*, pp. 55–58, 66–67, 73–74; *Popular Cause*, 44–50; Cf. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, “Decolonializing Applied Social Sciences”, *Human Organization*, vol. 30, no. 4 (Winter, 1971), p. 339, stating the functions of the militant-observer. Also see the discussion on the claims which action research can have as a new paradigm, presented by Heinz Moser, “Anspruch und Selbstverständnis der Aktionsforschung” (Vindication and Self-understanding of Action Research), *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1976), pp. 357–368. See also note 31.
- 30 “The point of view of life, of practice, must be the first and fundamental point of view in the theory of knowledge,” V.I. Lenin, *op. cit.*, p. 133. Quote on reality originating with G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, p. 261.
- 31 Within the Colombian left, only the Colombian Communist Party has had a fixed policy of socioeconomic research partially related to its work; it publishes *Marxist Studies* with texts by its militant-researchers. Socialist groups began to do the same thing. In this sense, it has frequently been forgotten that the bonds between theory and practice are evident for those who have developed the science and modern techniques as assets of the dominant bourgeoisie, or in order to defend the *status quo*. This ranges from political left to right. Cf. Moser, *op. cit.*, p. 366 and references to P.A. Clark, *Action Research and Organizational Change* (London, 1972). Norman Birnbaum notes that the “Moynihan Report” on development in urban negro communities of the United States (1969) is considered to be a case of this type of “action research”. N. Birnbaum, *Towards Critical Sociology* (Barcelona, 1974), p. 209.
- 32 G.W.F. Hegel (*op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 622, 657–663, 674–680) establishes the relationship between that which is teleological in man and the self-purposiveness of nature which man uses in his work. Cf. E. Mandel, *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 147.
- 33 Also “human engineering” à la Kurt Lewin, or “applied science” normally understood. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston, 1974), pp. 263–267, on “the positivistic isolation of reason and decision”. One of the first discussions on the “Theses” as key to the works of Marx, and their translation to a “philosophy of practice” (praxis), is that of G. Gentile, *The Philosophy of Marx* (Pisa, 1899), cited by Bottomore and Rubel. It can be mentioned here that there exists a “philosophy of the praxis” relatively developed by Lenin, Gramsci, Lukács and others, yet, it has not advanced much beyond the *Theses on Feuerbach* as criteria of orientation or validation, while there is no such “methodology of praxis”, unless this is translated, as attempted here, to elements of action research with the orientation of historical materialism. That is to say, we did not notice an element in the idea of praxis which permitted us to convert this, in itself, into an analytical category.
- 34 Wilfred G. Burchett, *The Vietnamese Triumph* (Buenos Aires, 1969).
- 35 Mao Tse-tung, “On Practice,” *op. cit.*, 1968, p. 319.
- 36 It does not appear necessary to elaborate further upon this point. The convergent observations made by several scholars on this respect may be consulted: T. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, pp. 141, 147 (on artificial distinction between fact and theory), and pp. 33–34 (on simultaneity of experimentation and the formation of theory); J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, pp. 78–79 (on the philosophy of history as a guide to the praxis and its political sense); G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22 (on the starting point of practice), 263, 347 (from the theory of practice to practical theory); J.G. Fichte, *Fundamental Principles of the Science of Knowledge* (Madrid, 1913), Vol. I, p. 79 (on practice and reflection); Antonio Gramsci, *The Formation of Intellectuals (Notebooks from Prison)* (Bogotá, s.f.), pp. 72–74 (on the bonds between theory and practice, the relationships with common sense, and the role of the scientific community); Louis Althusser, *Response to John Lewis* (Paris, 1973), p. 36 (priority of practice above theory and being above thought); and others.
- 37 E. Mandel, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 61.
- 38 O. Fals Borda, *Ciencia propia*, pp. 58–61; cf. A. Gramsci, *op. cit.*, p. 81; E. Mandel, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 61. “All men are philosophers”, A. Gramsci, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- 39 A. Gramsci, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–70. On the other hand, for Fichte “popular philosophy” is filled with errors for it does not “succeed in presenting the proof of things as facts”, and cannot “succeed in communicating it” (Fichte, Vol. II, p. 46).
- 40 C. Wright Mills, *On Social Men and Political Movements* (Mexico, 1969), p. iii.
- 41 P. Feyerabend, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 189. The following statement was attributed to the North American politician Adlai Stevenson: “There is vision and purpose in small people. . . Many things are revealed to the humble that are hidden from the great”, *Time* (January 24, 1977), p. 17.
- 42 Mao Tse-tung, “Several Questions on the Methods of Direction”, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 119; Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question (1937–1938)* (Ithaca, 1974), p. 5, 25, 102; Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *Strategy and Tactic of the Vietnamese Resistance* (Bogotá, 1972), pp. 55–59.
- 43 Cf. E. Mandel, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–69. This scientific knowledge evidently is that produced by active and militant researchers committed within organized, basic groups, according to the methodological principles set forth in the present paper.
- 44 The author was in favor of organizing two magazines, one along the lines of the old format and the other directed towards the workers. In this, his opinion was shared by the writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, spokesman for the opposition. However, this arrangement was rejected by the new Bogotá editorial group which had, wrongly so, assumed a triumphalist attitude. The magazine was temporarily suspended in December 1976, after a meritorious run as critic of Colombian society and state. Its publication was resumed in April 1977.
- 45 From here, the well known debate on the “ideological input” from outside the popular masses which Lenin

- resolved by adopting the policy of intellectuals and party cadres along the lines of Marx and Engels as pertains to the theory of the social classes; V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works* (Mexico, 1944), Vol. I, p. 121. Cf. Moura, pp. 106–108. This nevertheless, can be enriched through dialogue which overrides differences between subject and object and prevents unilateral imposition, from top to bottom, of new knowledge or new ideology (see the following section).
- 46 G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 83, 223–225. Cf. P. Feyerabend, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
- 47 One possibility is that of studying the fundamentals of the physiocratic interpretation of common sense as “public opinion”, this being formed by a collective reflection guided by competent philosophers, and as a concrete application of the praxis (political control and social action); Cf. J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, pp. 78–81.
- 48 Lukács had defined the ideological functions of historical materialism as an arm of the proletariat to judge the capitalistic social order and reveal its essence, as pointed out earlier. In these circumstances, “knowledge leads, without transition, to action”: G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–91.
- 49 Cf. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Buenos Aires, 1971), pp. 109, 191: “To the extent that the proletarian struggle takes a clear form, (the theorists) do not need to discover science in their own minds; they must only observe that which is occurring before their eyes and create their vehicles of expression” in order to arrive at “revolutionary science”.
- 50 According to that conceived by Plato; cf. G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, p. 261. On specific mediating categories, G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
- 51 This is a theme for another study. The present author worked under the premise that revolutionary consciousness and ethics determining the use of money and other material resources necessary for this task could be created. Instead, much of the criticism made against the corrupting effect of money, outside assistance, etc. had the appearance of petite bourgeois morality with a bad conscience, as was uselessly explained on repeated occasions. Cf. *The Truth is Revolutionary*, pp. 39–45. These experiments in action research received economic support from a great diversity of institutions: they ranged from civic and developmental programs of neutral or socialist countries (e.g. Sweden’s SIDA) to Holland’s Solidaridad Campaign and the National Committee on Self-Development of People, in the United States. None of these institutions imposed any condition on use of funds.
- 52 It is possible to develop Marxist popular leaders if we follow Gramsci’s experience stipulating “to work towards promoting an intellectual elite of a new type coming directly up from the masses, remaining in contact with them in order to convert this elite into a basic nucleus of expression” (A. Gramsci, *op. cit.*, p. 81). Cf. E. Mandel, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–67, and his thesis on “advanced cadres”; Orlando Fals Borda, *Unfinished Revolutions in Latin America* (Mexico, 1975), p. 46.
- 53 Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London, 1973), p. 264, 266. It is questionable that in other countries, even in some developed ones, the ideological situation of the proletariat is better than in Colombia. As is known, the historic performance of the proletariat in advanced capitalist countries is one of the most acute paradoxes of contemporary Marxism, yet, one must take into consideration that in Europe worker-philosophers of some stature appeared such as Joseph Dietzgen, praised by Marx and from whose writings Lenin took several of his main ideological concepts. Marxism has rather been a movement of the high intelligentsia from the end of the 19th century when it began to make itself felt in academic and scientific circles; cf. Bottomore and Rubel, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–63; L. Colletti, *op. cit.*, p. 54 (on Lukács transformation from revolutionary ideologist to university professor).
- 54 G.W.F. Hegel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 671–674.
- 55 The concept of “dialogue” has revolutionary dimensions in this type of contact, as explained by Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1970), pp. 83–84. This seeks to discover objective reality and to create awareness of the situation in order to eliminate oppression; also see Gramsci’s opinion (*op. cit.*, pp. 89–91) on the pedagogic relationship. Pertinent experiences in adult education are, today, material for reflection, as the “participatory research”: *Convergence* (Toronto), vol. 8, no. 2 (1975), pp. 24–87.
- 56 In this manner, the establishment in Colombia of that which was called “bastions of peasant self-management” (*autogestión*) could be interpreted as part of the organization of the peasant (*usuario*) movement. See Orlando Fals Borda, *History of the Agrarian Question in Colombia* (Bogotá, 1975), p. 143–147. Also, remember the advice of Mao Tse-tung to his “cultural workers”: “In all work done with the masses we must depart from the need of the masses and not from individual good intentions. . . Here we have two principles: one, the real needs of the masses and not those we imagine; and, the other, the desires of the masses and the decisions they themselves make and not those we make in their place”, “The United Front in Cultural Work”, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 186–187.
- 57 G. Lukács, *op. cit.*, p. 312; A. Gramsci, *op. cit.*, p. 76; E. Mandel, *op. cit.*
- 58 Mao Tse-Tung, “Preface to Rural Investigations”, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 9; Cf. L. Colletti, *op. cit.*, Part II.