Zeitschrift des Max-Planck-Instituts für Rechtsgeschichte und Rechtstheorie
Journal of the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory

Rechts Rg geschichte

Rechtsgeschichte
Legal History

www.lhlt.mpg.de

http://www.rg-rechtsgeschichte.de/rg34
Zitiervorschlag: Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History Rg 34 (2026)
http://dx.doi.org/10.12946/rg34/177-178

Rg 34 2026 177 – 178

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Sentipensante Research Methodologies

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Sentipensante Research Methodologies*

How to transform people into sentipensantes or sentient thinkers? According to Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, peasants have always been sentient thinkers, as he discovered in his field work with fishermen of the marshlands of San Benito Abad. In one of his conversations in the early seventies, his interlocutor informed him that »we act with the heart, but we also use our heads and when we combine the two things, we are sentipensantes«.[1] Nonetheless, Fals Borda never explored the concept in depth. Instead, he lets other authors – for example, Eduardo Galeano, in his 1989 *Libro de los abrazos* – develop their own understandings of the concept. Notwithstanding, two decades after his experiment in action research in collaboration with the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC), Fals notes that »being sentipensante synthesizes the proposal of participatory research« by »merging science with art«.[2]

Years later, in a series of evaluations of his work with ANUC, Fals Borda advances a broader argument that underlines the centrality of creativity in action research. In his writings, he repeatedly appeals to a narrative strategy that he calls »imputation«, which consists of reading historical evidence through other contextual data, thereby adding texture and narrative in order to evoke scenes from the past. Fals imbues characters with imaginary dialogue, inserts vivid reconstructions of the historical landscapes through which characters wander, and personifies fundamental values of the peasantry with icons, such as the »amphibious man«, who personifies how farmers take advantage of both aquatic and terrestrial resources. Through these narrative devices, Fals Borda's writings add flesh to the bones of documentary evidence. He argues that his use of these techniques dates back to his work with the peasant movement.[3] That is to say, imputation is much more than a literary strategy.

The clearest example of imputation is the creation of documentary comics that tell the story of peasant struggles on the Caribbean coast during the first half of the 20th century.[4] Cartoonist Ulianov Chalarka listened to the peasants while they recounted their experiences of struggle and, based on their narratives, he produced sketches that were organized into comics panels by the research team. One might say that Chalarka analyzed the historical trajectory of the peasant movement while he was drawing; he selected the scenarios that in his opinion were key to the narrative, deciding how to represent characters, events, and the geographical context.

The role played by the peasants in the creation of these scenes was equally important: they offered comments and corrections to the first drafts. In addition, public readings of the comics at training seminars provided a space for exercising the rural imagination. Comics require that readers activate their imaginative faculties to fill in the gaps between panels and reconcile the divergences between the verbal and visual contents. Peasant readers saturated these gaps with their own experience, so the published comics were not finished documents, but an intermediate step in the process of consciousness-raising.

One of the key exercises Fals Borda used was the sociodrama, through which peasants reconstructed historical episodes in dramatic presentations. He explicitly identifies sociodrama as an example of imputation.[5] Sociodramas supplied a space in which peasants could evaluate their role as political actors in the present, because the exercise forced them to inhabit the characters of the past and reflect on the process of remembrance. They also

* A longer version of this article was originally published as Joanne Rappaport, Metodologías sentipensantes de investigación, in: Cambios y Permanencias 15,2 (2024) 29–33, https://doi.org/10.18273/cyp.v15n2-202403.

1 Ricobassilon, Orlando Fals Borda – sentipensante, video, YouTube, 17 August 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbJWqetRuMo&t=44s.

2 Orlando Fals Borda, Experiencias teórico-prácticas, in: Víctor Manuel Moncayo (ed.), Una sociología sentipensante para América Latina, Bogotá 2009 (1998) 303–365, here 318.

3 Orlando Fals Borda, Knowledge and People's Power: Lessons with Peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia, New Delhi 1985.

4 Ulianov Chalarka, Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la Costa Atlántica, Monteria 1985.

5 Fals Borda, Knowledge and People's Power (fn. 3), 320.

caused viewers to recognize the players as historical actors who, although they were playing characters from the past, became identified with the protagonists of historical struggles at the same time that they were engaged in activism themselves. This overlapping of figures from the past with activists in the present stimulated not only historical analysis, but also feelings of belonging to a broader community. Sociodramas gave peasants the opportunity to become »sentipensantes«, who were at once rooted emotionally in a community and able to analyze their position in it.

In my opinion, the creation and interpretation of comics and the use of sociodramas constituted research spaces. To understand this, it is useful to combine Fals' participatory methodology with another more recent approach used by artists. Research-creation is a field of inquiry that repositions the locus of investigative activity inside the process of artistic creation itself: Artistic labor becomes the space in which reality is analyzed, instead of in the process of gathering information, so that the artistic process itself constitutes a research space in which new interpretations are generated, ones that are not always accessible through writing, but rather, function visually, auditorily or performatively.[6] Research-creation is thus a process of producing an artistic artifact – be it a fixed object, as in the case of a sculpture or a comic, or ephemeral, like performance art – involving a movement from abstract knowledge to a concrete inscription or performance, in order to make the meanings visible through the senses.[7] Once again, a feeling-thinking strategy.

I have long thought about the need to expand our appreciation of research beyond the process by which researchers collect and analyze information. In participatory action research, investigation becomes the space in which community is created through the exchange of information and recollecting a past that is relevant in the present. Sometimes this process takes paths quite distinct from conventional academic research. Its definition must arise out of the community itself.

In the case of the collaboration between Orlando Fals Borda's team and ANUC, I suggest we reinterpret the process of creating comics or the use of sociodramas in order to understand them as vehicles for research-creation. While participation, the creation of horizontal relationships with the aim of erasing the distinction between subject and object, and an orientation towards a political use of research are key elements of Fals Borda's methodology, creativity and the use of imagination not only served to produce stories that were more enjoyable for the rural reading public, but constituted spaces in which the ANUC rank and file and its local leadership were able to exercise their investigative powers and become sentipensantes.

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6 Henk Borgdorff, The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia, Leiden 2012, 45.

7 Elsa María Beltrán-Luengas, Alejandro Villaneda Vásquez, La investigación-creación como producción de nuevo conocimiento: Perspectivas, debates y definiciones, in: Index. Revista de Arte Contemporaneo 10 (2020) 247–267, here 265.