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Celebrating the legacy of Orlando Fals Borda

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And yet he had time to sit with me whenever we met in World Congresses and elsewhere, to listen to songs of Rabindranath Tagore, and to write to me from Bogota that he and Maria Christina, his beloved partner in life and in his struggles, were often reading Tagore and longed to hear more of his songs.

A more complete man than Orlando, so brilliant and so dedicated a humanist and at the same time so very lovable in personality, I have not met. Such persons do not die. Orlando will continue to live, within the many that he has touched and inspired, and through the profound works that he has left behind him.

Notes

- 1 De Silva, G.V.S., Mehta, N., Wignaraja, P., & Rahman, A. (1979). Bhoomi Sena: A struggle for people's power. *Development Dialogue*, 2, pp. 3–70.
- 2 Acronym for 'Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor'.
- 3 Fals Borda, O. (1985). *Knowledge and people's power. Lessons with peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Columbia*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.
- 4 The fuller story of this switch in personalities is narrated in Rahman, A. (2007). *Through moments in history. Memoirs of two decades of intellectual and social life (1970–1990)*, pp. 238–239. Dhaka: Pathak Samabesh.

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Celebrating the legacy of Orlando Fals Borda

Almost 30 years ago, my first job in Colombia as an NGO adult educator included something fairly innovative at the time: doing action research. I now remember finding inspiration for that work in the then recently published *Mompox y Loba: Historia Doble de la Costa (Mompox and Loba: Double History of the Coast)*, by sociologist Orlando Fals Borda. That was in the late 1970s. Fals Borda's work opened the path for a different way of doing research and inspired us to be bold in our own work.

In addition to the powerful ideas, most intriguing about this book was its unique format offering parallel narratives derived from the research. On one side, almost magical realist stories and legends were registered in the voices of fisher-

men and hunters of *la Costa (the Coast)* Colombian region. On the other was a rigorous sociological analysis of the ‘amphibious culture’ that characterized the region’s inhabitants and supported the researcher’s claim for them as a national cultural treasure, despite their invisibility.

Mompox y Loba told the story of the poverty-ridden people of the river culture who welcomed the sociologist into their daily lives so that – as he said – he could ‘walk, swim and row’ with them to discover together the spirit of their culture. It brought to life, for example, the story of the legendary goddess Maria Varilla, whose electrifying dancing of the *porro*, the region’s anthem, still ignites popular imagination with her beauty and passion. The text registered his co-researchers’ love for life and how – despite their many troubles – they always felt that joy had the winning hand. Theorizing the group’s identity as people who act with their heart but use their head strategically to survive, a co-researcher said, ‘*mejor dicho, somos sentipensantes*’ (‘in other words, we are “feelthinkers”’). A product of participatory inquiry, this poetic term was later borrowed by writer Eduardo Galeano to characterize a Latin American worldview.

Today, remembering Fals Borda decades and miles away from Colombia, I scanned the web and watched short video excerpts where he describes Maria Varilla and the concept of *sentipensante*. I devoured many YouTube versions of news stories about his departure: 83 years of age . . . the Father of Colombian sociology . . . founder of *Universidad Nacional*’s Sociology Department . . . scholar of folklore, violence, guerrillas . . . born on the coast . . . public intellectual . . . honorary President of the Colombian progressive coalition. I even saw a video of the famous *porro* Maria Varilla, with images of joyful men and women dancing and re-enacting the famous legend.¹ I played it several times in Fals’ honor: a small, humble homage from another land.

Fals Borda taught us to trust the wisdom of ordinary people, honor their voices, value knowledge coproduction, and support social change from the ground up. His invaluable work in the theory and practice of action research and his courageous activism will continue to inspire the many who mourn his passing and celebrate his legacy.

Notes

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLb-lqkYb3U&NR=1>

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