Research, participation and the neo-liberal context: The challenges of emergent participatory and emancipatory research approaches*

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abstract

Political commitment linked to robust research is seen as a major challenge amongst progressive researchers. Many suggest that one way forward is to engage with those being researched in novel and participative ways so that a democratic spirit is sustained. The preferred methodology is 'participatory action research' (PAR). The paper begins with an outline of PAR and its attraction for balancing political commitment with value-neutrality in research. It then discusses the importance, purpose and radicalness of what we interpret as a 'left-radical' methodology for making alliances with those excluded in myriad ways. The paper subsequently insists on the need to understand the limitations of PAR used by those working from within the neo-liberal academy. We insist that its utility depends upon context, feasibility and desirability. Without this awareness, and without connecting with a broader understanding of the notion of organic and committed intellectuals, then PAR (still a relatively unused research practice) becomes practically limited if not merely symbolic. First, PAR is not inherently democratic – it has radical usage but it is a methodology subject to various social appropriations. Second, when used by left-radical researchers, PAR should be emancipatory; however, it is not the only or the best way to engage with people outside the academy. Third, while some of us working within the academy have been fortunate to use PAR, there are constraints due to the rise of the neo-liberal university.

Introduction

This article is a contribution to the growing interest in the question of how academics, specifically self-declared radical and progressive academics, should intervene in the world beyond the academy while maintaining a semblance of what is commonly understood as 'professional independence' (the latter being something we argue is under extreme pressure). To explore this commonly perceived dilemma – maintaining objectivity while practising social and political commitment – the argument will be made that research methods and social commitment are not simply sustained by becoming more scientific. Rather, seemingly paradoxically, researchers need to become more sensitive to, and engage with, power relations in the research process.

The article will start with perspectives on 'participatory action research' (PAR). It will highlight some difficulties associated with what we see as second order problems of research procedure and technique, sometimes interpreted as necessary measures to adopt in pursuit of a critical-radical science for those committed to social change. Researchers often flag these special methodological measures as a way to prove one's scientific expertise, and on occasion radical social scientists may utilise a number of features from the toolbox of critical realism as a means by which to establish their scientific credentials.

Specifically, the article contributes to the debate on the role of professional academics researching labour and other marginalised and disempowered social groups in contemporary capitalist society in a way that is inclusive and political, yet thorough and robust in academic terms (see Brook and Darlington, 2013). This is part of a broader argument as to how important it is to sustain rigorous scholarship whilst not being 'detached'. Echoing Darlington and Dobson (2013) we support their push for a partisan perspective. This is especially important in a context where we are asked to focus our attention on more commercial or commercially related activities and where the context of our work as academics has become increasingly defined by neo-liberal institutional restraints (Durand and Stewart, 2014). These developments are not just specific to the academy. We have argued previously that the growing forms and patterns of incorporation typical of academics and their research endeavour have been paralleled by similar processes amongst many trade unions and other groups and social organisations (see Stewart and Martínez Lucio, 2011). This recognition formed part of the discussion in our 2011 article where we abjured counterpoising a stereotypical academic-participant/subject narrative but considered rather the intellectual and political processes in terms of research and learning amongst 'those researched' in general. Hence, we attempted to widen the discussion by starting not from the vantage point of the academy, where we worked, but rather the political

challenges of researching in a more emancipatory manner. In so doing we sought to use a broader approach to the notion of organic intellectuals so as to question the binary between the 'thinking activist' and the oppressed – the traditional view privileging the university academic. At that point we recognised that mapping the nature of the impact of engagement with people beyond the academy over time required continuous reflection on the relations and interests of those we research. Edwards (2015b) later addressed the idea that reflection itself should address the challenges presented by engaging with others at different stages of academic research. Our paper tried to focus on questions of power and voice with respect to the way in which 'subjects' are engaged.

Building upon this previous study, our argument here is three-fold. First, that to critically engage with those politically marginalised (in labour, social movements and those with no movements) requires, to begin with, a critical understanding of the relationships in the sites of research (i.e. in the 'academy' today and in the 'field'). Second, we call for recognition that the methodologies required for engaging with people as research participants beyond conventional research agendas are, perhaps unfortunately, inherently political and unstable even if desirable. Third, the development of arguments that are unashamed, transparent and honest in their political commitment free from the insinuation of the loss of value neutrality has become increasingly necessary (Darlington and Dobson, 2013).

If the matter concerning engagement with those we research was relatively easily resolved through the use of such approaches as PAR, then one could argue that more researchers, for there are still a number of radical researchers today despite the impact of neo-liberalism in the sector, would use this methodology. This is not to say that it is straightforward, or that in any case it is always possible, let alone desirable, to use participative action methodologies since it all depends upon the objective of the research. As Burawoy (2009), a leading exponent of a public sociology, has argued, participative research, as utilised by him in the context of what he termed the 'extended case method', requires considerable time and commitment not only from the researcher but as much from the research participants for whom in some instances the research may be life changing. Thus, the investment of time and effort, including methods, is context dependent. Engagement with PAR is not as straightforward as first imagined.

The paper will start with an outline of participatory action research and its attraction for balancing 'political commitment' with 'objectivity' in research. It will then discuss the importance of the purpose and radicalness of left approaches to the study of work and how a 'left-radical' public sociology may be constructed. However, the paper will insist in its later sections on the need to

understand the significance of political factors and the limits to establishing a participatory research agenda in a neo-liberal context. Without this awareness, and a commitment to connecting with a broader understanding of organic and committed intellectuals that includes those organised voices within studied communities, such new research trajectories become symbolic or practically limited.

The importance and ironies of participatory action research

In this section the paper explores the justification for the perception of PAR as the inherently radical research methodology. For us, PAR can indeed be a key research strategy but there is more than one way to use PAR. We argue that to assume, as some recent converts have, that PAR is inherently anti-system, is a misjudgement. Originating in the work of Tavistock Institute's 'action research' (AR) agenda in post-war Britain (Lewin, 1946), despite more recent use in radical democratic research portfolios, action research together with research participant involvement can also be used as a managerial tool for delivering consensus. Moreover, links between action research (it can be argued that in the hands of some researchers PAR is nothing more than AR practiced with a contemporary democratic flavour), and socio technical systems, has been highlighted by, for example, Greenwood and González Santos (1991) and Crézé and Liu (2006). Recognising that PAR has developed out of an approach to action research which historically has been concerned with group dynamics and processes associated with organisational development leading to peaceful, consensual, workplace agendas for 'healthy organisations' should give pause for thought. For instance, variants of action research in social services in the 1980s in the UK provided an important bedrock to a range of 'intermediate treatment' (IT) schemes with young people. On occasion, IT became a managerial tool for individualising a range of collective problems encountered by social and community workers. In other words, this is not a story about how AR is an inherently beneficial radical research tool. What can happen is that transformative ideas – if we can describe aspects of early AR in this way – may be domesticated by management ideologues. Boltanski and Chiapello describe this elegantly as a process by which management 'delegitimate[s] previous spirits and strip[s] them of their effectiveness' (2007: 28-30, emphasis in the original). In a different register, Jameson (2014) sees contemporary hegemonic strategies as instantiating discourses sustaining a philosophy of social democratic compliance.

PAR, in our view, is no more likely to be used in a democratic way in research practice than any other approach for engagement between researcher and research participant. While we are not arguing for Boltanski and Chiapello's

hard line, nevertheless management ideological capture has to be an ever-present concern. Our argument is that PAR is not radical in itself as such, but rather it is the socio-political orientation of the researcher. In a recent example of the process by which originally transformative and *potentially* revolutionary ideas may end up chanting orthodoxy, a social science department in a UK university advertised for a researcher skilled in PAR practices (for the sake of anonymity, a number of details have been changed):

> The Researcher will have the opportunity to undertake and direct all aspects of the project working with an already established group of citizens. A participatory model of research will be drawn upon. The methodology will include, focus groups and [...] use of quantitative and qualitative methods alongside experience working with those with lived experience.

This is an illustration of the way in which methodologies can become formalised, institutionalised and, in missing the point of their justification, abandon any hope of going beyond the potentially limited practices between researcher and researched they were originally intended to challenge. In the case above PAR is a seen as a toolkit more than a set of principles. The division between researcher and researched indeed tells its own tale. Perhaps we should not be surprised. PAR is, after all, visible in the formation of aspects of policy and practice in some local authorities in Britain (see Brock and Pettit, 2007). One can highlight the methodological practices of a range of researchers whose work would comfortably embrace McTaggart's (1989) well known '16 tenets of participatory action research'. More recent vintage linking PAR to a specific radical political agenda is witnessed in work by Cahill and Elana Torre, (2007) who argue that PAR, while essential for radical democratic engagement with research participants, carries the expectation that it goes beyond methods for getting a better grasp on the specificity of how any social relationship works. For these writers, PAR is inherently disruptive to the situation the researcher finds him- or herself in. The leitmotif of the approach is that it turns the politics of particular situations and people involved, co-researchers, into active, political agents seeking change. When Cahill and Elana Torre (2007) argue that PAR is important as a means to 'provoke action by research', this presumes a praxis for the purpose of understanding that the situation is one which also anticipates activity to change it.

As researchers and co-participants therefore we are concerned to actively promote our research politically. This was a critical feature in the setting up of the Migrant Action Research Network (MARN) in the north of Ireland in 2007 (Garvey and Stewart, 2015). MARN was developed specifically using PAR as a means to develop an emancipatory agenda for researchers who emerged from a number of migrant communities in the north of Ireland. The original meetings

were convened by a community activist working for a community trade union and a university researcher. The subsequent meetings, which brought together a number of migrant workers and families, developed a research agenda as a means to advance strategies that might tackle a range of labour and extra labour market issues including exclusion in the work place, racism and sectarianism in the community. More fully reported in Garvey and Stewart (2015) and Garvey et al. (2011) nevertheless we can repeat here that the seminal outcomes included the development of a number of political interventions. One precipitated the self-unionisation of migrant workers in a food processing facility and a recycling plant. These interventions also led variously to the implementation of a number of work place rights (see the migrant workers' report to the government and the subsequent response from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Northern Ireland, personal correspondence).

What can be said is that to be distinctively radical, researchers employing a PAR agenda will typically orientate their activity around a number of premises. First, what are research methods for? Second and relatedly, who can use them – who wants to avail themselves of the results of the research? If PAR is about tools of analysis only (as we see in the Tavistock's earlier agenda) then politics and notably the politics of method will not be at issue. However, if political matters are of concern – and moreover a politics for (radical) change – then radical researchers seeking alliances with those engaged in what should be a form of collective fieldwork will see that methodology is a political matter. In this regard, following Freire (1970), if our research is concerned with the position of those we are engaged with the starting point must be that we work and research with them on the basis that they will be our co-participants – as we endeavoured to achieve with our co-participants who became researchers with us in the north of Ireland. They were not our research *subjects*: this opens up the space of the political within the research agenda bringing with it new challenges. This is indeed another way of saying that while it is perfectly possible to utilise a range of democratic approaches to research and data collection which can be defined as PAR, the idea that PAR is implicitly more 'radical' is open to question if we are not alert to the political and social dimensions of research spaces. Perhaps we can say that PAR comprises a spectrum running from the formally engaged research participant (subject) deliberating research results, to the other end of the spectrum, on which 'subjects' are full participants deciding not only how and who does the research but why. Furthermore, the purpose of the research will be not merely to understand more fully, and more satisfactorily, the quality of research outcomes. Specifically, the reason that the 'why' (the purpose) question is indelibly tied to the 'how' (tools of analysis) question is because, from this radical end of the spectrum, they are both made sense of by the question of how one views the origins of the problems they are studying and the objectives of one's research.

This is what delineates a radical PAR from mainstream PAR and a more regular action research agenda. Thus, from our perspective, deciding to engage with people in research in terms of assumed participative equality (remembering however that not everyone can do, nor wants to do, what everyone else does in a collective research project) is not the same as a radical view of PAR which sees research participants as engaged with researchers in terms of political correspondence – i.e. collective participation in a project of social change. Indeed, a radical PAR seems to be concerned with a commitment to systemic change, not merely with tinkering although this is not a universal understanding of PAR. A radical PAR makes sense of the research field by assuming conflict and potential crisis as incipient in the ontology of the social milieu: recognizing the fundamentally conflictual nature of social formations thus provides the starting point to the beginnings of a radical PAR. Jameson (2014), Reason and Bradbury (2001; 2008) and notably Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) PAR principles provide a reasonable stylised brief for the beginnings of a radical PAR.[1] We therefore now turn to a recent argument for the methodological tool of choice by a number of radical researchers.

The purpose of radical approaches to the sociology of work: The 'critical distance problem'

In a compelling argument for critical researchers to adopt a more politically engaged PAR research methodology, Brook and Darlington (2013) pose the question of what it is that radical intellectuals aim to achieve not only by their research but also *in* their research. We can describe this as the 'why' and the 'how to' couplet: the *raison d'être* question. Yet we wish to add to the *raison d'être* question a problem. Although 'why' we research poses the question of 'how' we research, a crucial issue to take into consideration must be the political context of research. Political context includes issues such as research funding protocol, the consequent wider concerns over the scope for research autonomy, and the cultural and socio-political disposition of the researcher.

Emphatically, we would maintain that this question of political context impacts on a number of concerns for our research practice. Amongst these is the problem presented by mainstream researchers critical of radical approaches to

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[1]   Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) key variables, in no particular order, are: *Planning* change/ *Acting* and *observing* processes and outcomes of change/ *Reflecting* on the latter/ once more - *Acting* and *observing*/ *Reflecting* once more. These, it is argued, allow individual participants to reexamine their own and others actions within organisations while laying the basis for equity (their own and others). Reflexivity and change, after all, are central to the objective of PAR.

research. The former argue that radical approaches involving commitment to those researched commonly lack critical (*qua* 'objective') distance between the researcher and the researched (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 237). This is said to arise when those researching socially marginalised social groups are unable to maintain value free objectivity. We might describe this as the 'critical distance problem'. We argue that while methods matter (no one gains from inadequate methodological practices), greater attention to scientific rigour in itself will not convince hegemonic social institutional peer groups (especially in the universities), let alone government and other policy cadre, that 'scientific objectivity' makes critical social researchers' objectively derived results *convincing* (i.e. acceptable). Our view is that research by radical intellectuals should as a precondition also challenge *inter alia*, the social framing and assumptions, and thus socially and politically constructed notions of value neutrality as the answer to a wider acceptance of one's research results. We should be alert to the limitations of trying to reconstruct such scientific concerns as they are always contingent in some respects and determined by extant power relations (Edwards, 2015b; Ram et al., 2015).

Specifically Brook and Darlington's (2013) answer to the so-called 'critical distance problem' is, in our view, to insist that while partisanship is not only defensible but necessary to engage in critical research, value neutrality will be sustained and publically demonstrated (and for this they draw from Siraj-Blatchford, 1995) by keeping a 'critical distance from agents to avoid the danger of wrongly asserting political faith over the contrary evidence' (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 237). However, as their reference to Beynon's *Working for Ford* (1973) illustrates, it does not matter how sound the research is, if it challenges capital its credibility is always likely to be questioned especially when, as with Beynon's canonical piece, there is a clear counter narrative or critical position taken in terms of the research. Our point is that critical distance is a much greater challenge than meets the eye and we should perhaps be more aware of the limitations of trying to sustain it.

Yet this is a key concern, and Brook and Darlington's (2013) attempted resolution to their 'critical distance problem' posed to any radical intellectual (left radicals) engaged in researching those who are socially excluded, requires attention. This is a key issue because from our perspective, it is not just about engaging with those described by them as the socially 'marginalised and labour' (*ibid*.: 232-233). It is not just the requirement to engage with workers or the marginalised more generally that challenges the boundaries of committed research. We need to continue to emphasise engagement with, and exemplify the needs and concerns of, not just the marginalised. Also, we should recognise that the marginalised are the outcome of specific social, economic and political practices of exclusion,

which frame our own relation with the researched. Second, organised networks and voices within those constituencies that we research must be viewed as more active agents engaged with intellectual and research agendas in their own right.

This presents special problems familiar to all research of a critical nature. The issue for us, in short, is not one of ensuring sufficient critical distance but on the contrary, how to ensure much *less* critical distance from those who collectively challenge contemporary forms and patterns of oppression, and develop their own voice and agendas of a critical nature. This is another way of saying that our principal concern is not with the assessment of the institutional impact of our work, but rather our concern is with the intellectual agendas and projects of those excluded and challenging systemic subordination. In brief, it is possible to be close, committed and engaged while providing rigorous research. In the next section we consider how this might be achieved by using PAR.

Constructing a left-radical approach to research at work

For Brook and Darlington (2013) barriers to active participation between organic intellectuals within the academy, labour and others who are socially and otherwise excluded, are to an extent surmountable through the adoption of a PAR frame of reference. A PAR agenda will allow those they describe as 'left-radical intellectuals' to democratically participate with those they research in order to change both the nature of the relationship between researcher and researched, but principally in order to engage in social processes leading to, or outlining the terms of, progressive socio-economic change. Yet we would argue that understanding the organisational context of research and the pressures of the academy, and on the critical networks amongst those researched, are vital.

At the heart of this concern is the notion of the 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci, 1971). It is often felt in radical and critical approaches that organic intellectuals must seek space to 'engage actively with the marginalised and labour in the co-creation of knowledge that aids their struggles for change' (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 232). This is deemed preferable by Brook and Darlington to Bourdieu's (1998) limited, because avowedly still hierarchical, nomenclature defining the 'expert committed scholar' (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 234-5). The latter argue that PAR as we know is based upon democratic participation arranged in a non-hierarchical manner between both 'researcher' and 'researched' such that the latter becomes not, in fact, a researchee, but a co-producer of knowledge (*ibid.*). This is contrasted to a more limited understanding of PAR as understood by others (notably Huzzard and Bjorkman, 2012), 'who omit its widely held emancipatory principal' (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 238).

Emancipation must be the central determinant of a real PAR agenda premised upon commitment to shared engagement (viz., research, including methodology and putative social change). Moreover, the nature and form of engagement is important since unless one specifies the necessity to engage with a radical PAR, method cannot deliver the radical cutting edge required for radical social critique and change. Citing Reid and Frisby, they state, 'PAR is a critical approach that focuses on "democratizing the research process, acknowledging lived experiences and contributing to social justice agendas to counter prevailing relations that are deeply gendered, classed and racialized" (Reid and Frisby, 2008: 93)' (as quoted in Brook and Darlington, 2013: 238).[2]

However, our concern is that there can be limitations to the ability to use the kind of radical PAR that we and others would advocate. To assume – as do many – that determined acts of individual engagement will allow radical academics to engage democratically with socially marginalised workers and others outside employment who are socially excluded, risks relying upon a form of voluntarism. This is problematic in our view. Though the *leitmotif* of our research practice shares this motive of socio-political engagement, we would argue that such motives may be driven as much by altruism – for example, the need to support subordinate workers – as by systematic critiques of the causes of exclusion. Goodly and understandable though altruistic motives are, they may not always be locked into a collective or emancipatory agenda. We cannot take it for granted that they will be. Second, for a radical PAR to work properly, to ensure 'the people' are with the organic intellectuals and the organic intellectuals are with 'the people', we need a suitably rigorous, some would argue value-neutral, methodology and for some (including Brook and Darlington [2013]), critical realism appears to be answer. Nevertheless, we would maintain that we do not

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2   We do not know whether Huzzard and Bjorkman (2012) would be opposed to this view. Certainly, it is perverse to argue that Bourdieu, the central anti-democratic methodological villain in the piece, failed to promote PAR when the *leitmotif* of his active research engagement was precisely geared towards social movement participants as 'leaders everywhere' (see *inter alia* Bourdieu, 1998). While Huzzard and Bjorkman may not make the case in the source cited it is not clear from their other published work that their point of departure limits recognition of PAR's more 'emancipatory principle' (2012: 238). What is clear, however, is that the prospectus Brook and Darlington (2013: 238) offer tends to downplay key obstacles to its realisation as a form of radical engagement mainly animated by an act of will: 'Corresponding to PAR's principles of co-operative participation, the researcher's committed engagement from the outset should be marked by a continuous, interactive reflexivity framed by accountable, democratized relations with agents. [...] a researcher's organic connections to agents entails forging an interdependent relationship between co-researchers, comprising continual collective, critical reflection and open debate in their shared pursuit of organizational/social change'.

require a gloss to our commitment to partisan research. It may be that some feel the need to offer benediction to the concerns of the academy, the concerns of those who would dispute our research due to its partisanship. Some see the adoption of critical realism in itself as a sound way to demonstrate our 'objectivity' despite our partisanship, that it might offer a balm to some concerned by the sanction of partiality but we would dispute there has to be – nor that there could be – a common way we do radical research that will undermine and even perhaps defeat those in positions of power.

One key problem we outline below is that reality points to a range of roles and players within the process of reflection and learning, and this means that within the academy there are competing actors and vantage points as is also the case for those being researched. There will be uncommon ways of doing PAR. In effect, regardless of one's ontological underpinnings, we need to show greater sensitivity to the positions of power and dependency from whichever vantage point of PAR we adopt. Below, we build on the understandings of our colleagues by outlining some of the insights and challenges that we have experienced as researchers.

The politics and challenges of alternative PAR methods

In this section we argue that while PAR is often necessary its utility always depends upon context. Second, when we do use PAR it has been for the purpose of supporting collective action. This is because as radical researchers we are committed to a politics of social and class transformation: our objective is to structurally challenge social subordination arising out of class society. We would not advocate its use just because it sounds like a good idea, as one might interpret the job advert above. Aside from political objectives, the impact on those we research with outside the academy may be quite profound so that its utility has to be measured sensitively. So, we would argue that the debate over the character of the relationship between researcher (the organic intellectual for many) and the participant in research and/or those with whom organic intellectuals make alliances in the pursuit of social change, is reflective of at least two things: the first is the site of the academic and the second is the site of the researched.

Firstly, from the point view of radicals in the academy, to what extent is our research – what we research – and the manner in which we research, still indelibly linked, if not over-determined by, what is going on in the academy today especially with respect to its increasingly commercial transformations? To what extent is our bid to defend notions of independence and autonomy being

undermined? This goes back to the need to discuss the question of researching those without a voice in the context of understanding why they do not have a voice due to extant systems of representation and control. For sure this is so, yet we come to our central point which is that one cannot just decide to do PAR because it seems like an elegant research method. This means – as stated previously – we need to address the social and political context of exclusion alongside our work with the 'marginalised'. Method is not enough for as we know PAR has, from its origins in the Tavistock Institute, been as concerned with reconstituting dominant social relations in a search for workplace consensus as it has been with Freire's liberation sociology's democratic transformational change by action-participant researchers in the global south. Thus, we need to be clear as to our roles in the process of researching with those marginalised who are collectively challenging the status quo in determinate ways. Yet, we cannot understand our role, nor what we can do to engage with others, unless we are aware of how our environment, how the academy, has changed and become commodified through neo-liberalism for this may determine what it is that we are able to do – or not. For, if we cannot understand the ways in which the academy is being shaped and *further hierarchically structured* by the complex forces of neo-liberalism and other changes affecting what and why we research, how we research and when we research, then simply saying that we need to be open and honest with those *who* we research and generically include them may miss the point. If we recognise that one of the issues we need to address is to do with the autonomy we have for engaging in transformational research, we might recall that our autonomy has never been a straightforward given. Even during the period of the post Second World War consensus, and the subsequent liberalising of the university during and since the 1960s, when liberal democratic norms based upon collegiality allowed more scope for critical research engagement, we should not imagine halcyon days free from constraints.

Still, whatever the limitations on our research practice in the past, the neoliberal university is changing how we can engage with various communities in a profoundly detrimental way (Durand and Stewart, 2014). This has resulted from the exigencies of neo-liberalism's various forms of internal and external control of academic practice today. Specifically, the engagement debate at the heart of PAR is actually being redefined around a more elitist understanding of the research community (e.g. the latter are seen predominantly as represented by businesses or elite policy makers).[3]

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3   One of the limits to democratic engagement in terms of open research is the nature of contemporary political economy and arguably, it is why, in this particular instance, accountability matters in a way that is different from orthodox (hegemonic)

Second, following on from this, there is also a need to understand the dynamics of changes taking place within the politics of the spaces researched. Let us illustrate this with an example drawn from the authors' research. When studying the emergence of what some label 'new management practices' in various industries in the 1990s – in terms of the way management was attempting to control and incorporate workers through new forms of quality oriented participation and surveillance mechanisms at work (Garrahan and Stewart, 1992; Martínez Lucio and Weston, 1994) – we noted that academic engagement with the labour movement was less than straightforward. Worker activists themselves had been engaging – mainly in isolation – with developments such as new management practices highlighting their highly exploitative nature. This emerged from various independent worker networks, trade union educationalists and critical activists within the labour movement. This also led to a range of independent publications as well led by worker activists and educators.

We would consider them 'organic intellectuals' in that they provided a rationale and scoping of a political nature. In particular, they addressed the character and social consequences of 'new management' practices that were becoming hegemonic across industry and the public sector. Furthermore, many of these networks of activists were concerned with the way that official trade union hierarchies to some degree were willing to turn a blind eye to such developments in the hope that multinational corporations and employers generally would not disinvest or close down workplaces. There was a particular pattern of political and discursive closure within the labour movement on such issues especially various official dimensions of it. This closure was sometimes blocking attempts by organic worker intellectuals to develop patterns of social, political and intellectual autonomy from increasingly hegemonic forces by expounding narratives akin to new management practices. Business facing and more bureaucratic oriented trade union leaders and officials were utilizing a version of new management practices to shield themselves from work place organic intellectuals while sustaining a much closer relation to employers. For radical academics aligning themselves with workers and other subjugated groups

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institutional understandings. For us, in contrast to the contrived notion of accountability decreed by university management, accountability needs to be seen through the prism of democratic engagement with all those we research with based on a critique of their social relations and our organisational relations as researchers with them. Accountability matters not so that everyone can do what everyone else does, but rather accountability, *qua democratic accountability*, matters so that everyone can decide on the purpose and applicability of the research. The 'everyone' to whom we refer is those with whom we research for the purposes of social transformation: hence our insistence on the need to emphasise the purpose and politics (the 'why') of research and not only participatory processes in our methodology.

around these developments in management practices, in many instances they were confronted with a highly organised set of alternative networks and debates in advance of their own position. This required a different logic of engagement and mutual support between worker intellectuals and radical academics. As radical academics, we and others developed forms of research and alliances with such independent networks in sectors such as automotive manufacturing, airlines, postal services and food manufacturing.

Thus, we need to revive a closer engagement with labour-in-work and the diversity of collective worker narratives (and their politics) (Stewart and Martínez Lucio, 2011) and not just 'provide voice' for workers in an individualist manner. We need to understand the political dynamics and tensions within which labour operates including how, in various ways, it responds collectively.[4] There are debates in those spaces even before the 'explorer academic' sets foot in those environments. In effect, in many cases, as for example in those outlined above of the north of Ireland and the trade union networks in the UK, there were competing views, perspectives and actors engaging with the issues being researched. Whilst not concurring with the radical pluralist perspective of Edwards (2015a) we do nevertheless agree with the argument that there may be multiple interests for workers in a concrete situation – including sometimes contradictory ones – such that the 'researched' display complex and not always inclusive relations. Nevertheless, we would add that these interests will in turn play out around political discourses and tensions – relations of hierarchy and power – and that within those contexts these interests will be articulated not just by individual workers but by collective networks and bodies. In this respect, in order to be clear about the purposes of the research, an initial meeting and ongoing dialogue seeking a consensual alignment between the objectives of the radical researchers and those they are working with is necessary.

Thus, far from assuming a hierarchical division between workers and radical-partisan intellectuals in the academy, we would argue that it is defensible to articulate common political and intellectual trajectories. This dialogue around transparent political agendas is necessary to make sense of the roles in research and learning as well the political constraints and challenges on different nodes within a PAR approach.

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[4]   This reanimation has become increasingly necessary because the academy and a number of trade union officers together with their various research departments have in some cases become concerned with an employer or business oriented as opposed to a worker-centered agenda: thus space for critical research is now more complex (Stewart and Martínez Lucio, 2011).

In the UK, beyond radical publications (including for example, *Capital and Class* and *Race and Class*) this issue of the politics amongst those studied, or those doing the studying, is rarely discussed within radical or critical approaches. Yet for those radical scholars who are concerned with closer engagement, the aim is how to seek *closer* links with people, not to fret over the judgement made by establishment norms of how to make proper good research relationships with those with whom we engage. This is because, and indeed as our colleagues Brook and Darlington (2013: 237) argue, whatever you do, 'There is the perennial risk of research being stigmatised as political activism rather than scholarship'. Yet the issue is not about stigma as such. The challenge is to recognise the ever more political nature of the research field.

This is because no degree of scientific methodology let alone realistic criticism will necessarily convince those who manage us that the arguments of the marginalised matter because the objectivity of the supposedly scientific methodology tells the world, if not the whole truth about power (in a realistic way) then at least the better part of the truth. Utilising what some see as otherwise useful techniques such as critical realism cannot do it either because not only does it not tell any truth better than the one told by Beynon's *Working for Ford* (Brook and Darlington's exemplar of a radical researcher pilloried by the employer for a lack of sociological impartiality), it does not convey in any meaningful way the actual practice of radical organic intellectuals. It's not about methodology – it's indeed about politics in the broader sense. Whatever truths are revealed by the methods radicals employ, hegemonic forces in society in many ways seek to deride them. So our colleagues are right about the need for democratic participation in research collaboration even if they tend to overplay the nature of, and capacity for, critical openness. Nonetheless, we need to be alert to a broader political reality and set of engagements within which our work is framed.

This is why it is not so much about the procedures or rationales of research methodology including methods of research engagement that matter. More pointedly, it is not solely a matter of which methodology will convey value neutrality and thus be regarded as 'truth', since the nature of research engagement with those subordinated is also the problem today for those in dominant positions in the academic hierarchy. If shackles are increasingly being placed on all forms of engagement and especially radical forms, how might these be broken, or at least loosened? This is important because despite the common knowledge of many that the world is exploitative, every individual's particular expertise is limited by their own experience and while they are able to make wider, generalisable, understandings of others' worlds (the necessary starting point for all politics) any individual's expertise is necessarily to be matched by

those whose own knowledge necessarily adds to the possibility of generalisability. This includes those academics themselves who may have a peculiarly framed experience that lacks understanding of specific issues. It also means being open and honest about one's perspectives as an academic in terms of affiliation, funding and purpose (Darlington and Dobson, 2013: 294). The political context may vary in terms of the extent of acceptance of such transparency and in some cases the level of tolerance of radical and emancipatory research may be quite limited.

Expanding and radicalising the understanding of intellectual and research activity: Widening our understanding of radical research and participation.

While method indeed matters, method should be understood as politically informed analysis that is located in a critique of social contexts and positions. Thus, it is odd that when we are encouraged to imagine a form of critical, participatory engagement, that the practices of an increasingly conventional social research agenda, critical realism, is conjured up by many when this is in any case quite limited in terms of participatory practice. Even where it is possible to use critical realism as a research agenda this would tell us little of its practical and transformational possibilities (Archer, 1995). This is curious because since the 1970s (*inter alia* Freire, 1970) it has become increasingly difficult to imagine the value of a radical participatory, transformative, research agenda that does not align openly with those it is designed to engage with beyond the academy. In our reading, the utility of Archer's critical realism for radical and critical engagement with people in struggle would be of limited value. Arguably, whatever the method adopted, given the constraints of the neo-liberal university we have highlighted, perhaps we are more pessimistic than others due to this context.

Yet we are keen to continue to engage with those beyond the academy where and when we can by using the radical PAR we have practiced in the past. This PAR envisages the adoption of a radical and transformative agenda premised upon recognition of the political and the plurality – and hence challenge – of engaging with external agency in a radical manner. However, to be 'radical' is to be more than just 'critical'. It requires the inclusion of other voices together in an alignment with those concerned with democratic deficits and other, broader, and often emancipatory agenda. Our view, our intervention, requires that the 'researched' and 'non-academic' consist of organic intellectuals who form counter narratives and research agendas having their own politics and perspective on the meaning of emancipation. This is quite a specific and significant departure from the normal sense that everything, because it is interesting, necessarily represents the same politically researchable value for

radical researchers. Of course, the notion of the professional academic with his/her independence can act in various ways to limit critical engagement with those communities beyond the academy we seek to work and research with. It can, in these times of neo-liberal duress, including the impact of neo-liberal managerial protocol, understandably serve to reduce time and commitment to anything other than standard, *qua scientised*, approaches to research. Time is more limited today and 'committed' research carries many risks that were less threatening to job security in the era of social democratic state pluralism (Durand and Stewart, 2014). Nevertheless, our point is that we still have a choice about how and in what contexts we utilise PAR.

Would that it were so straightforward because within various radical Marxist and broader emancipatory constituencies there has recently been a deeper questioning of the power relations of contemporary society including the employment relationship around precisely this theme of the balance between moral and professional interests. Another way of presenting the dilemma for critical researchers from a range of radical traditions is to pose it thus: how might some of the problems today confronting partisan intellectuals in the UK committed to marginalised workers and labour and other excluded social forces be understood? This is a pressing issue as we are propelled increasingly into a neo-liberal context of instrumental educational objectives. By way of illustration of the torpor exuded by neo-liberalism in the academy we cite Perry Anderson's censure. Comparing the ebullience of the academy in France with the relative intellectual impoverishment of UK universities, he argued:

> [...] the contrast with the blighted landscape of higher learning of England, where the very idea of institutes of this kind is unthinkable, as universities risk reduction to so many sales outlets for customers in need of livery for the market, remains arresting. Stefan Collini has compared the vice-chancellors and assorted notables who acquiesced in this disaster with the collaborators of occupied France. But Vichy was never just an isolated handful of traitors. How should the failure of the English academy as a whole to put up any serious resistance to its degradation, by Conservative and New Labour regimes alike, be described? 'Spineless' [...] (Anderson, 2014: 39)

Without having to accept the full voluntarist judgment issued in Anderson's polemic it is nevertheless likely academics in the UK will understand his reasoning. Those he sees as managers of 'sales outlets' would be (are) especially ill at ease with critical researchers who throw down the gauntlet for a partisan engagement with subordinate communities beyond the academy.

Thus, to recapitulate, any discussion of the role of radical or partisan academics and the challenge of aligning ourselves with the marginalised, while maintaining some semblance of professional rigour, must start with an awareness of the

organisational, political and economic context of the university system *and beyond in the economy and civil society*. This fundamental shift in the organisational landscape is central to any engagement with the important and welcome contribution by a number of critical academics. Hence, any declaration of interest may help nuance the role of the academic and union or social activist researcher or intellectual (Darlington and Dobson, 2013). Nevertheless, as we pointed out with respect to the impact of neo-liberalism in terms of the research environment, that can also limit the space for the academic or activist to operate within.

Discussion and conclusion

Interventions such as Brook and Darlington's (2013) in attempting to rethink PAR and the role of the partisan academic are fundamentally important because at their heart is the concern with inclusion, knowledge and emancipation. There has to be a balance between democracy and what might best be described as technical proficiency (professionalism) in social research. However, like us they are following a path not unknown to radical academic researchers. While the list is long we identified briefly the work of Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) eight PAR principles, Reason and Bradbury (2001; 2008) and especially the call for committed engagement pursued by Cahill and Elana Torre (2007). Many academics have also pursued more committed and inclusive approaches to research that are alert to the political narratives we noted above (see Connolly, 2010). It is part of a serious discussion about how as academics we ensure we are not pulled further into neo-liberal and new hierarchical relations in terms of research activity but rather maintain independence and (here is the dilemma) democratic, progressive, and socially inclusive aspirations. More than this, it is about how we create the possibility for greater emancipation through our research. Ultimately, the challenge is to sustain a critical awareness as to who it is we research *with* and how their role is not just tokenistic. More than this, the issue is about how we re-landscape politics and discussion in our research.

However, since the external sphere of research and the internal space of its design is already politicised we require a clear view of the external/the research space as being problematic and diverse. We argue this because otherwise one could use a critical research agenda to corporatise radical research by just stating that we need to be 'closer' to the researched and 'work with those' acting as the exploiters. The examples here could include, inter alia, senior management, senior accountants, senior policy makers, and others in various hierarchical locations (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). The problems we face within our own environment are common in state agencies, trade unions and social

movements in terms of their knowledge related activities.[5] It is therefore important to engage with the realities of political relations and narratives within public bodies and social organisations.

In this respect at the heart of the radical participatory agenda research must be an emancipatory, radically democratic one which in fact creates mutual support and relations across and against the undermining strategies and institutions of contemporary capitalist societies. It must be an agenda promoting an understanding that methodology (even when participatory and engaged – and jointly designed) is insufficient without a political, more open, discussion as to the context in which the participants find themselves, their reflections and discussions. This agenda promoting open commitment is feasible, necessary and desirable for anyone describing themselves as a radical academic. In the end, the starting point may not be the role of the academic but the role of the academic as part of a broader alliance across subjugated groups and networks. In effect, there are limits to academic methods and good intentions unless a broader, political, view of research and purpose is made salient. Otherwise we reproduce a hierarchical view of the radical research process driven less by research humility.

This perception also involves recognition of the structural limits imposed by contemporary employment regimes in all sectors including the academy. It is also about acknowledging that we are not solely the arbiters of knowledge but that there exist countless points of resistance and emancipatory networks consisting of organic intellectuals in the broader sense and a range of alternative narratives (see, *inter alia*, research by Garvey, Connolly and others highlighted above). In this respect, we may not have to see the academy as the privileged starting point for such work any longer and realise that whilst objectivity, transparency and openness are very important we nevertheless need to realise that the current rush of interest in this topic must be a bit more mindful of the political shifts and impact of neo-liberal orthodoxy on the relations we are discussing.

Hence we would argue that, to add to the already important contributions to the debate on the efficacy of radical research methodologies utilising a PAR perspective, our departure makes three modest observations that we feel problematise the engagement of radical research activists including ourselves based in the academy. First, the nature of the socio-economic transformations of the last three decades have meant that academics wishing to use this radical research methodology are having to negotiate certain previously taken for

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[5]   As pointed out, the origins of PAR, reaching back to the objectives of the Tavistock Institute, can be defined in this way.

granted relationships. Utilising PAR does not require an academic position in a university, as we know, and working as a radical (PAR) researcher outside the academy has its own difficulties. However, utilising PAR while working in the academy has another set of unique concerns. Research methodologies are now subject to increasing external political interference while being constrained by sometimes positivistic protocol under the auspices of new forms of academic research evaluation such as the Research Excellence Framework and its various antecedents, in the case of the UK. Second, because PAR is time and resource intensive, it does not lend itself to the current drama of *get-rich-quick* research activity. Third, since our co-participants are also subject to variant forms of neo-liberal subordinations – and previous forms of subordinations too – in their own lives, the risk of activism-with-researchers is problematic. We have found this to be the case in our work in a range of sectors from automotive manufacturing, postal services, trade union policy formation, and the study of migrant communities and the politics of their representation.

Relatedly, being a politically engaged academic researcher does not require that PAR is either always appropriate or the necessary starting point for radical research with others beyond the academy. Moreover, neither is it obvious that when working with people beyond the academy, or when working with others who are researchers in the community, that PAR *in itself* will change perceptions, undermine hierarchies or create a better knowledge than existing approaches. Nor are we convinced that for PAR to be always successful that this definition of de-hierarchicalisation is required. Class divisions in capitalist society are culturally disempowering and at the same time if community activists want a researcher's engagement it will because s/he has a useful role to play. The struggle for transformation belongs to the community/union committee/refugee group. Accordingly, besides PAR there are different ways to be 'really democratic' when engaging in research with those excluded by neo-liberalism.[6] We dispute that all those proselytising PAR recognise this. Bourdieu (2012) despite the rejection of his self-described democratic research protocol by many committed to PAR, was certainly democratic in his research as was demonstrated in his exploration of the habitus in which the struggle for Algerian independence was played out. This could be taken as another way of arguing, again, that the focus and issues are as much about politics as they are about methods when it comes to determining the democratic character of our research. Following on from this, methodology cannot in itself be the salve for delivering truth. Our concern is

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[6]   Once again, we are not referring to those non-academics using PAR, including social movement activist researchers. They have quite different problems as we discussed in the context of our research with automotive assembly and postal workers (Stewart and Martínez Lucio, 2011).

merely to point out that if researchers are anxious that the public reception of their work will be enhanced when the scientificity of their results is confirmed then this assumes an openly receptive and apolitical research environment in terms of funders and users.

It seems to us therefore that it is entirely reasonable to argue that radical engaged research can only happen in a truly transformative way by means of democratic participation and an open approach to what knowledge is. Democratic engagement between researcher and research participant, whatever the sector or the radical social movement, potentially transforms the nature of the outcomes of the research while it may potentially transform the lives of others participating in it. One of our key points of intervention here is to emphasise that the constraining nature of context needs to be recognised. To be radical is not solely to engage with workers and citizens in a participative manner but also to use this to raise an awareness of the limitations of democratic dialogue within our social and economic context. To be radical is to intervene progressively and to also point to the 'iron cages' that constrain us. PAR is indeed about power.

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