

Democratization Enabled By Participatory Premises In The Qualitative Study Of Companies Recovered By Their Workers (CRW)

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ABSTRACT

Incidents of companies being recovered by their workers that have occurred in different countries have attracted media attention. Based on ideological tendencies, some experts have interpreted these processes as an indicator for their fulfilment of their own predictions.

In contrast to these interpretations, this article focuses on the effectiveness of the use of the main premises of Participatory Action Research (PAR). The focus is on understanding the point of view of the involved protagonists. Qualitative evidence is presented (Díaz Ruiz, 2014) demonstrating the existence of disaffected feelings towards experts caused by their interviewing approaches. This disaffection is explained as a consequence of pre-built ideas connected to the experts' ideological tendencies.

Keywords: Participatory Methodologies; Qualitative Techniques; Companies Recovered By Their Workers (CRW); Effectiveness Of Scientific Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies into Companies Recovered by their Workers (CRW) in Argentina identify their special circumstances in two central issues: 1) the state of debt or bankruptcy of the companies at the time of their recovery and 2) the recovery as being a part of a process (Magnani, 2003; Fajn, 2003; Rebón, 2004, Ruggeri, Martínez & Trincherro, 2005; Fernández Álvarez, 2007).

As a worker's response when faced with the loss of their employment, the Argentine recoveries are not solely connected to the crisis which engulfed the country in 2001¹. Although this crisis did have an influence on the proliferation of recoveries, given the seriousness of the levels of the country's unemployment and exclusion, the context for the actions undertaken by the workers is marked by a continual deterioration of working conditions and rising unemployment throughout the 1990s, characteristic of the era of flexible capitalism (Sennett, 2000; Alonso, 2000; Carnoy, 2001; Prieto, 2002; Castillo, 2003; Castells, 2005).

The collective prominence of the workers in the process of recovery means that their subjective viewpoint becomes a central element for analyzing and understanding cases which have taken place both in Argentina and also in other European and Latin American areas². As such, the aim of this paper focuses on the possibility of applying the basic conceptual premises of Participatory Action Research (PAR) when using qualitative research techniques. The working hypothesis concerns the methodological effectiveness of this approach, from the practical consideration of the increased level of workers' agency in the research process. This consideration of their agency happens via their participating in reflecting on the important issues and their own interpretation of their actions.

¹ For more information on the background of companies recovered in Argentina in previous decades, see the work of Andrés Ruggeri (Ruggeri, 2009).

² See the work of Andrés Ruggeri which compiles accounts of other experiences (Ruggeri, 2009).

The methodology used consisted of carrying out six in-depth interviews with the employees at a CRW in Buenos Aires³. The informants are considered to be "owners of the problem" and horizontal, collaborative relations are established with them in the design and carrying out of the interviews, following principal premises suggested by Davydd Greenwood regarding PAR (Greenwood, 2000).

The results show, firstly, that the workers identify and give meaning to the recovery as a survival strategy. Secondly, narratives can be observed around the perceptions and disagreements with interpretations which they consider to be very different from their own view of events. These results demonstrate the need to include horizontal notions of collaboration and exchange of knowledge between researchers and the key actors.

DEVELOPMENT

Previous reading on the informative and occasionally idealized treatment of CRWs as an event presaging the fall of capitalism, together with information provided by the CRW Documentation Centre,⁴ enabled the author to establish how PAR premises could be applied in the design and realisation of interviews carried out at Chilavert, a company recovered by its workers in the city of Buenos Aires⁵.

Specific interest in Participatory Action Research (PAR), as conceived by Davydd Greenwood (Greenwood, 2000), led to the inclusion of some of the central considerations of this particular approach to social research in carrying out a case study of CRWs in Argentina.

These premises are condensed into two ideas by means of which Greenwood proposes the efficacy and democratizing effects brought by PAR to the work of the social sciences (Greenwood, 2000). These two ideas are, firstly, that the informant is considered to be the "owner of the problem" and, secondly, that collaborative horizontal relations are established between the researcher and the actors in the scenario. In these relations, both parties share objectives and interchange significations regarding the social reality under investigation. This takes place, fundamentally, with regard to the identification of problems, the prioritizing of needs, and the development of suggested solutions.

Carrying out PAR research is not easy, given the corporatist and partisan behaviours which can obstruct deliberations over agreeing on the key questions shaping a problem (Greenwood, 1998). However, consideration can be given to actors' key role as agents, as well as to collaborative relations between the social actors and researchers. Taken as principal methodological assumptions, these considerations mean that the criteria of representativity can be transcended, thanks to the participation of individuals implicated in a social problem. The result is the democratization of scientific work implied by the use of these principal assumptions in social research. This, in turn, implies a democratization of the work of the social sciences.

The application of participatory premises became, primarily, the reason for the author's interest in visiting and undertaking a sociological research project into CRWs in Argentina, with the aim of accessing the subjective view of the workers who carried out the recovery of their companies⁶.

³ This research took place by means of an academic residency at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires directed by Professor Juan Silva in 2010. The field work took place at the graphics company, Chilavert, which was recovered by its workers in 2002 and housing the CRW Documentation Centre, which was set up by the research team from the Open Work Programme (Programa Facultad Abierta) directed by Andrés Ruggeri at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, UBA. The Documentation Centre houses a diverse range of information on CRWs in Argentina. Following the work carried out into recovery processes led by workers (Díaz Ruiz, 2014), the ongoing direction of the author's research is focused on developing the efficacy of the basic premises of PAR which were applied in the interviews conducted, particularly in relation to the criticisms and disagreements shown towards pre-determined interpretations made of their actions which have not been analyzed to date.

⁴ Research into CRWs in Argentina, which is compiled of information on cases that have had a national impact, can be consulted (Programa Facultad Abierta, 2003; PFA, 2004; PFA, 2010)

⁵ An example of the idealized views of recovered companies is the 2004 documentary "The Take", directed by Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis. The film focuses, as its title suggests, on the takeover of a company by its workers, without accounting for the special circumstances of the recovery as a process where the takeover is simply the first step and, in some cases, does not occur at all, as discussed below.

⁶ The particular circumstances of Chilavert should be borne in mind with regard to the openness shown by its workers towards granting interviews and receiving all types of people interested in learning about their situation as a CRW. Chilavert is a CRW which practices an "open-factory policy" which consists fundamentally of leaving spaces, within their own facilities, for the use of diverse activities in the fields of cultural

During two months of fieldwork at Chilavert graphics workshop, time was spent with workers and the outline of a script of the interviews was developed by means of their contributions and answers to questions that they thought were most important to be aware of. To an initial script which, using the SWOT analysis method, included questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the company eight years after its recovery, the following topics were added:

- Initial thoughts on their collective action: defence and urgency of situation
- Reasons: the perception of their situation prior to carrying out the recovery and of the context of this situation
- Factors influencing the decision to begin the recovery
- Description of their experiences with experts and onlookers interested in their case

In their theoretical, empirical and empathic nature, the different social sciences find a common starting point in the recognition that social practices lived by individuals and collectives are recursive. Social uses and perceptions are the basis for the resignification which reality undergoes in its structural dimension as a reality that is lived and acted in. Consequently, reality is imbued with sense, values, interests and identities definitively shaping the ways that individuals face their daily problems. As such, methodological questions considered to be important are better suited to the way in which different research techniques are used, which implies "a living space" as researchers (Mairal, 2000: 184). The result is the complementary nature of qualitative and quantitative social research techniques (Corbetta, 2003), with respect to applied social research's need to understand the subjective signification of the social reality for the actors who are living it (Alonso, 1998). To this end, the relations between researchers and social actors acquire a central importance in the validity of results obtained, which finds a basic support in the concept of "intercultural translations" between both parties (De Soussa, 2006). The efficacy and validity enabled by the use of participatory dynamics in forming diagnoses of social problems and proposed solutions has radical democratizing implications for participation as the principal differentiating methodological element.

On the basis of the results obtained, the following points can be established regarding the collective action carried out by the workers in the face of a situation which represented the loss of their employment from their own interpretation of the action undertaken⁷.

Initial Thoughts On Their Collective Action: Defence And Urgency Of Situation

The first description made by the Chilavert workers of the action they initiated to recover their company has to do with its defensive nature. In this way, they aim to situate the development of their narrative in the restrictive and urgent situation they found themselves in. Conscious of and aware of the heroic interpretations given to them by those who identify recoveries with the taking of power (of the means of production), the Chilavert workers situate the basic significations of their actions in the maintenance of their place of work being their only objective in a moment with no other options, given the seriousness of the economic crisis afflicting the country. Self-management or cooperativism were not concepts which the workers thought of in ideological terms. Their view of their own key role as agents is strongly marked by the obligatory character that the start of the recovery held for them, where they not only faced the possibility of the company's closure, but also the fraudulent and illicit attempts by the company owner to drain corporate funds before applying for bankruptcy. Far from any revolutionary plan to seize power, their sole objective was to try to return the company to working order, although in order to achieve this, it would be necessary to assume a form of collective self-management⁸.

solidarity, education and research. These activities include the workers' participation in meetings and talks about CRWs in order to share the knowledge of the recovery that they affected.

⁷ The use of collected interviews will be accompanied by the workers' own proposed identification as "Chilavert workers".

⁸ The main characteristics of CRWs in Argentina include, as a distinguishing feature, the state of bankruptcy or even abandonment, as well as, in the majority of cases, attempts at fraudulent draining of funds by the employers (Magnani, 2003; Rebón, 2004, Ruggeri, Martínez & Trincheró, 2005). As such, the term CRW is proposed by the workers since it fits the reality they take part in, where the recovery occupies the central focus of their collective action (Ruggeri, 2009).

“What we tried to do was to not lose our jobs, to not lose everything, because we were looking at losing everything overnight.” (Chilavert worker)

Reasons: Perception Of The Situation Faced Before Undertaking The Recovery, And Context Of That Situation

In the case of Chilavert, the turning point came with learning of the fraudulent attempts to drain corporate funds made by the proprietor of the company. Rather than renewing machinery, the owner was attempting to sell it before applying for bankruptcy. From this moment, in the interviews the workers agree on both the extreme need of the situation and the perception of profound injustice with no type of institutional protection to count on. This description of the situation, where they locate their reasons for deciding to begin the recovery of their company from closure, can be applied, not just to these workers in particular, but also to the workers of the country. As with other CRW cases, the workers' main reasons for initiating the process of recovery are layoffs, continual insecurity and late or non-payment of salaries (PFA, 2003, 2004 and 2010).

“After so many years working and pitching in when the boss has asked us to, knowing that he was trying to get out, to leave you there owing you all that money and more, that made us decide to try it. Everything was already lost, we had to try it.” (Chilavert worker)

The elements shaping the view of the Chilavert workers of the situation they were living in are inextricable from the gravity and seriousness with which they perceived the general situation in the country. In the midst of numerous company closures, the loss of employment meant, at that time, social exclusion. The levels of unemployment and poverty in 2002, after the first wave of the crisis, reached almost 19% of the population unemployed and over half the population in poverty (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, National Institute for Statistics and Census, 2002). In these circumstances, it was difficult to imagine the possibility of finding another source of employment (Perelman, 2002). The workers' perceptions describe a generalized system of employer abuses and breach of contract, as well as owners' fraudulent practices which aggravated the constant insecurity of labour conditions and which provide evidence of the political nature of the crisis (Ruggeri, 2004; Rebón, 2006; Trinchero, 2007).

Given the seriousness of the situation they faced without any other option, except to take unemployment benefits, which were insufficient to survive in the crisis scenario of Argentina in 2001, the Chilavert workers saw the company recovery attempt as the only way to avoid their loss of employment. In this sense, it is useful to note the influence of the crisis on the rise in the number of recoveries undertaken between 2002 and 2004, with nearly 50% of all CRWs in Argentina taking place during this time (PFA, 2010).

The Importance Of Social Supports: Social Legitimacy

For the workers, the recovery was a way of defending themselves from social exclusion which they knew they were destined for in the previously described context. However, the knowledge of the reasons they had to preserve their jobs, as they themselves explain, is in itself not enough to facilitate an understanding of how eight of the thirty employees of the company in 2001 (at that time called Gaglione) managed, with their own resources, to return the company to working order under a self-management model. The importance of distinct sources of support which they relied on must be borne in mind. Firstly, the workers note the help they received from other recovered companies and the MNER⁹ who provided them with legal advice in order to request legal recognition as a self-managed cooperative. In 2002 Argentina passed the Temporary Expropriation Acts, which the workers could appeal

⁹ The National Movement for Companies Recovered by their Workers (Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas [MNER]) was organized in 2001 by twenty CRWs. The MNER's distinction, as a social organization, lies in collective and direct action aimed at preventing companies' closures (Ruggeri, 2009). Other CRW organizations can be mentioned, such as MNFRT (National Movement for Factories Recovered by their Workers, Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por los Trabajadores), Red Gráfica, FACTA (Argentine Federation of Self-managed Workers' Cooperatives, Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajadores Autogestionados) and FECOOTRA (Federation of Working Cooperatives, La Federación de Cooperativas de Trabajo) (PFA, 2010).

to in order to continue legally with production¹⁰. In principle, these legal changes represented a way to stall the bankruptcy process and the sale of company goods, which allowed workers to continue working legally¹¹.

Secondly, the help from relatives and neighbours is highlighted by the workers, especially at the time when they initiated the occupation of the workshop to prevent machinery being removed while they awaited the resolution of the legal possession of the company's goods. After six months of the occupation, an eviction order was issued and hundreds of neighbours and relatives gathered at the doorway to block it. The judge eventually rescinded the eviction order.

Finally, they mention the support of wider sectors of Argentine society. In studies carried out into CRWs in Argentina, workers point to other actors who have collaborated in the recovery process. The main actors are public organizations¹², trade unions, political parties, customers, suppliers, university researchers and private attorneys (PFA, 2010).

This support signified more to the workers than merely the human resources and materials involved. In spite of the lack of institutional protection which they felt, the sources of assistance represented a moral support which translated into a social legitimacy. In this social legitimacy could be seen a shared vision of the problems which they faced, in the midst of the loss of credibility and legitimacy suffered by politicians and business owners as the parties principally responsible for the situation of national crisis.

“At that time, the entire country was on the streets, the people had taken to the streets. It was an unsustainable situation, and for us to see that, the people understood our reasons; that was very important.” (Chilavert worker)

Criticisms And Disaffection With Experts And Onlookers

The collaborative approach towards designing the questions which would shape the interviews during the period of time of the field work at Chilavert enabled the identification of issues related to certain experiences that the workers had been through with experts and onlookers who had become interested in their case. The recollection of anecdotes shows a large variety of situations which contain a common element in the view of the speakers, some of them journalists, students or interested onlookers - a perspective which was pre-idealized about their action whereby more than being simply workers, they were presented as victorious heroes in a battle against capitalism.

During informal conversations with workers, they also spoke of the consistent disagreements they had with pre-determined views which had been constructed about recovered companies. Finally, these issues were formalized and included in the interviews via questions about what it was that the workers considered was not a CRW. The central issue for workers' disagreements with others was around the question of the takeover and its significance.

For the workers, it is fundamental to understand that the takeover was simply a means to the sole objective they had - to continue working. It was only a first step, because at that moment the resistance efforts began. The initial resistance they had to face before they could return to production included police attempts at eviction, attempts to drain corporate funds and a lack of economic resources as the principal obstacles to the recovery¹³.

¹⁰ The passing in 2002 of the Temporary Expropriation Act explains why CRWs adopted the form of self-managed cooperatives. This law declares that the company has a public usefulness and, after expropriation, the State then pays the judge who is responsible for paying the creditors. The company thereby becomes state property and for a period of two years, with the option to renew, it is ceded to the cooperative of workers. Since this law went into effect, workers' actions have been aimed at processing requests for expropriation in order to continue working and to stall the bankruptcy process and the sale of company goods.

¹¹ In addition, in 2004 a permanent expropriation law was passed which affects thirteen CRWs in the city of Buenos Aires, one of which is Chilavert. This law establishes the sale of the company to the cooperative following expropriation, giving a grace period of three years for payment and twenty annual fees by means of which the state shall pay the creditors. However, payments to creditors have still not been made and it is possible that this law will not be extended.

¹² State organisations have given different types of help to CRWs. According to data collected by the Open Work Programme (PFA), 85% of CRWs receive state subsidies, 32% have political support from municipal or provincial authorities, 18% receive assistance to undertake training activities, 18% have received legal counsel, and 14% have received social program plans (PFA, 2010; 71).

¹³ "Occupy, resist, produce" - the slogan of the MNER (National Movement for Companies Recovered by their workers), summarizes the workers' objective and, as such, the particular circumstances of CRWs (Ruggeri, 2009).

“We didn't run the employers out of town; we didn't kick them out; that upsets me. We didn't start the problem; what we did was defend ourselves the best we could against an injustice that was putting us out onto the street with nothing.” (Chilavert worker)

Data collected on CRWs in Argentina indicate the secondary nature of the takeover compared to the recovery. Firstly, the number of CRWs which were occupied by their workers did not even reach half of the total number (Fajn, 2003; Rebón, 2004). Secondly, the situations where takeovers occurred are notable for incidents of breach of contract by the employers and for fraudulent attempts to drain corporate funds. Thirdly, the variety of cases where different events occurred indicates an important heterogeneity with regard to the length of time that occupations lasted. These could extend to months and even years, with different levels of conflict and political repression (Ruggeri, 2009).

These characteristics show that for the workers the takeover was not a programmed confrontation reproducing historical missions, but rather the only means available to them to defend their source of work and to claim payment of their salaries owed, endangered by a draining of funds and irreversible closure which they were forced to block.

“We didn't wake up one day and say let's take over the company (laughs); it wasn't just like that. Totally the opposite; we didn't know what was going to happen, but we had to try it.” (Chilavert worker)

Faced with idealized views, focused excessively on takeovers or occupations of companies or explanatory attempts alluding to the presence of representation of ideological or partisan affinities, the workers explicitly reject political partisanship or ideological affinities in the recovery process they took part in. These issues are for the workers' private and personal matters, unrelated to the representativity of Chilavert.

On the contrary, they consider that all the decisions they have been making, collectively and on a daily basis since the process began, are political. These decisions include the democratization of labour relations and the solidarity established with social groups in the local neighbourhood as well as with other companies. For the workers, both practices represent their commitment and contribution to generating relations and exchanges which are not focused solely on commercial objectives. In this way, they feel that their action as workers has consisted basically in defending their work and adopting democratic values, thereby broadening themselves beyond the production and economic limits of the company.

“Yes, we're always asked about political parties and we don't have anything to do with political parties. Here there are people of all ideologies and each person thinks whatever they like.” (Chilavert worker)

“We never received support from any political party, no party ever came here to help or to ask what problems are you facing, what do you need.” (Chilavert worker)

CONCLUSIONS

The efficacy and validity, which the use of participatory premises can enable in developing diagnoses of social problems and proposed solutions, lies in the democratizing implications that participation has as its main distinguishing methodological feature.

Researchers can share the objective of their research with the principal actors, as well as the intent of the work. The parties can exchange different knowledge and offer the possibility that the actors' main role as agents will be reflected in the identification of problems and the proposal of solutions. This enables a closer and more precise access to their subjectivity and a more effective analysis since it entails a democratization of relations between experts and the owners of the problem.

What the workers have said on the basis of this methodological approach leads to an awareness of their own constructed significations with which they have articulated their actions. The defensive character of the recovery process is a crucial issue in the workers' accounts. Their legitimacy is derived from the seriousness of the

situation they found themselves in as a result of breach of contract and attempts at deceit on the part of the employer. The takeover of the company, rather than being an end in itself, previously planned, is a means which the workers feel obliged to undertake and which has, as its only aim, the starting of the recovery process whereby they try to prevent the loss of their work.

In spite of the lack of protection which they felt during the first stages of the process, the workers relied upon the support of diverse sectors of Argentine society, which gave a social legitimacy to their actions.

The workers deliberately distanced themselves from pre-determined interpretations which were unrelated to their views. The political relevance of this collective response lies in the objective established by the workers - nothing more or less than to create a truly sustainable workplace by means of the self-management which they undertook forcefully when faced with a lack of options twelve years ago. Therefore, the recovery is the central issue in the process initiated by the takeover of companies. The actions were taken not in a stand against capitalism or capitalists but rather against the loss of work in what the workers felt to be an unjust manner. Each of the recovery efforts have been brought about on the fly, counting on the support and experience of previous recovery cases and with the uncertainty of not knowing what might happen.

The consideration of participatory premises allows a more precise approach to the subjectivity of the main actors in contrast to the a priori use of partisan, ideological systems of thought.

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