

Participatory Action Research (PAR)  
Shifting Paradigms: An Applied Anthropologist and a Socio-Spiritual Movement  
Meet the Ozarks

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To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namer as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in words in work, in action –reflection.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

To liberate society . . . consciousness will have to be aroused among the people; their eyes will have to be opened by knowledge. Let them understand the what's the why's and the where's. Thus study is essential, very essential.

P.R. Sarkar, *Liberation of Intellect: Neohumanism*

In the fall of 2001, I began to experiment with a process of participatory action research (PAR) in the spiritual movement I have been dedicated to for over twenty- five years, *Ananda Marga* (Ananda Marga is a global spiritual movement, based on the teachings of eastern mysticism – see [www.anandamarga.org](http://www.anandamarga.org)) and its associated organization for social liberation Proutist Universal (see [www.prout.org](http://www.prout.org)). While our philosophy encourages a process of social liberation through a synergy of social activism and the cultivation of spiritual awakening, our members largely lack a praxis to apply this knowledge to the lived experience of real communities. Our discourse remains largely theoretical.

This paper tells the story of an initial paradigm shift from theory to action that is evolving as I write this. In the summer of 2002, a friend and town planner, Allan Rosen, and I facilitated four-day PAR training at our national retreat center in the Ozarks of Missouri. Our members formed teams and did fieldwork in the local community. The objective was to simultaneously

transform our relationship with the surrounding community and shift the local community's perception of us. We often came to the retreat as "spiritual tourists," coming for spiritual renewal while ignoring local history, culture and social issues. At the same time local community members called us "orange people" and one of our nuns was told that people thought we kidnapped and killed people. The PAR experience transformed our relationship with the community and planted the seeds for a partnership with community organizations.

As an applied anthropologist, I have also been able to experiment with my own paradigm shift through this process. Applied anthropology speaks the language of community change, but the field in general is awkward in facilitating the process of true community transformation and relationship building. It focuses on western/positivist notions of community that is problem-oriented rather than transformational (see Van Willigen, 1996 for a general survey of this field)). My transformation involves the discovery of my own "indigenous" praxis of applied anthropology that is grounded in the spiritual processes and values of my spiritual faith and integrated with the concepts and processes of social liberation in our social philosophy. Here I have discovered a delightful fit with Paulo Freire and popular education and an emerging field of indigenous social science praxis based on the work of Maori anthropologist, Linda Tuhiwai Smith.

## Introduction

The aim of participatory action research is to change practices, social structures, and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice, and unsatisfying forms of existence.

It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

From *The Handbook of Action Research, Participative Inquiry and Practice*  
Peter Reason and Hillary Bradbury, 2001, p 1.

Thirty of us sat in a circle, chanting Baba Nam Kevalam (roughly translated from sanskrit as “let us ideate on supreme love”). We then meditated silently in this white-carpeted room with large windows that overlooked the lake, children’s playground, and lush foliage of our retreat center.

This was the beginning of four-day training in participatory action research for our members who were interested in our philosophy of social transformation. This article tells the story of this training; the learning going on by those facilitating the training, as well as what was learned by the participants. The training came at the end of a year of personal examination and experimentation with participatory methods. It involved the examination of my own paradigm of applied anthropology and a heuristic process (Moustakas, 1990) of inner reflection about a participatory praxis that matched our philosophy of spiritual and social transformation.

This story begins by introducing the field of PAR and the relevance of critical pedagogy and *pensamiento propio* (the emerging culture of activism). Next is a narration of the background and purpose to the training. This is followed with a dialogue about how the above concepts shed light on applying our social and spiritual philosophy to the PAR training. The Ananda Marga Ozarks retreat center is then described and the pre-planning and preparation for the training is discussed. The eight sessions of the PAR process are presented, which include each of the training sessions, and the final sessions synthesizing and reflecting upon what was learned. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of what the facilitators learned from the experience and how I have used the experience for my own praxis of social change.

Participatory Action Research, Critical Pedagogy and *Pensamiento Proprio*

Participatory action research is one of an array of emerging participatory technologies, in

which a team or community inquire about issues that concern them, asking initial passionate questions, investigating and dialoguing, taking action to address these issues and reflecting upon the process. This paradigm is based on the epistemology of action in relationship, that knowledge, action, and inquiry form a cycle of collective engagement, within the group, and within the community or environment of inquiry (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, pp 9 - 12).

The special nature of participatory action research is that it focuses on the structural nature of a social problem, and often assists oppressed or marginalized people identifying and overcoming the cause of their oppression (Fals-Borda, 1991, Whyte, 1991). In the process, the group often evolves its own particular style or ideology of action and reflection that is termed *pensamiento propio* (literally own beliefs or “alternative ideology”). *Pensamiento propio* is the special culture or way of learning that a group evolves from its own values, local culture, experiences, and generation of knowledge (de Roux in Fals-Borda, 1991, pp 49-53).

As a whole, participatory technologies often refer back to the inspirational work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (Freire, 1995). Freire developed a tool for teaching literacy, where exploited factory workers reflected upon themes in their daily life – factory and living conditions, and contrasted these with the values and lifestyle that was sacred to their culture. Through this process, consciousness-raising was coupled with activism enabling poor workers to transform their lives through love, rather than anger.

Participatory methods have found a home in education reform in the field of critical pedagogy (see Giroux, 1997 for a thorough review of this field), again based strongly on the insights of Paulo Freire. This field challenges the educator to interrogate the mental frameworks that may prescribe or colonize their notions of education, for example in the way that history texts inscribe a model of history as the story of our “dead white founding fathers,” neglecting the mosaic of perspectives and histories. Here, participatory methods help the educator in creating new forms of knowledge in relationship with others, for example working with students to

develop their own notions of history through studying the local community.

I bring up the dynamics of PAR, *pensamiento propio* and of critical pedagogy, because they were an essential part of the process of developing the PAR training for Ananda Marga. While our teachings encourage us to rise above colonizing sentiments and psychologies, our social service projects reflect a western colonizing model. Many of our schools often follow the British colonial style of row by row seating with a call and response teaching style. Our social science research also often follows the western colonial model of the lone researcher extracting information (Notable exceptions are regional studies done in Eastern Siberia and Burkina Faso, Africa). A special concern of ours in facilitating the process was to discuss our taken for granted assumptions as well as to make more transparent the influences that colonize our notions and relationships with a community. It was critical to begin to consider our spiritual and social ideology as its own epistemology of social science.

In thinking about our own indigenous *pensamiento propio*, I was strongly influenced by the work of Maori anthropologist, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, (2001). Smith articulates an indigenous social research project attuned to and immersed within a Maori epistemology.

Smith followed her traditionally educated academic Maori father to research in American museums, and entered academia steeped in positivist tradition. Her book deconstructs the westernizing impact of her own style of research. Then she dialogues about her own Maori past and struggle to find a Maori research praxis that does not just respond, resist or struggle with colonizing methodologies. It is one that finds strength, purpose and practice immersed in Maori community, culture, and the struggle to negotiate its goals in western terms.

Smith welds her notion of a Maori-based research process to two interdependent Maori concepts: *Kaupapa* and *Whanau* (2001, pp 184 – 193). *Kaupapa* is a truly Maori indigenous worldview, and it is also an organic concept, actively engaged with and circumscribed. It is research that involves the mentorship of elders, and is culturally appropriate while satisfying the

rigors of research. (Kathy Irwin in Smith, page 184). Kaupapa Maori is a criticalist approach in analyzing the structural and political causes of inequalities, yet it is also emancipatory, and grounded in community (Smith, pp. 185-186).

Whanau is the notion of Maori family or community organization; it is the core social unit, rather than just a collection of individuals. It is a way of protecting ethical values, of giving voice to community, and a way of bringing individual expertise and backgrounds into a research collective.

After reading Smith, I realized that our social and spiritual philosophy formed a similar indigenous value system, ontology, and epistemology of social science. Our spiritual philosophy was based on eastern mysticism and the search for universal truth through the practice of meditation. Our social philosophy sought to complement the inner spiritual culture with an outer social culture of harmony and equilibrium while being pragmatic about pressing social issues. Like Smith's process of de-colonization, our philosophy was meant to help us rise above the conditioning of imposed psychic exploitation, seeking liberation by penetrating this colonizing process, and grounding social transformation in cultural, social and ecological sustainability. Just as Smith's purpose was to evolve a Maori social science praxis, our task should be to evolve A similar praxis arising from our social and spiritual philosophy.

### Background to the Ozarks Training

My experience with participatory methods began in 1994 when I helped start a primary school in Australia for Ananda Marga. There was a conflict between our desire to teach through our spiritual philosophy and a desire in the community for an anarchist-oriented school. We conducted community-wide focus groups to learn of the community's diverse values and interests in education, and then developed a vision for the school that integrated our spiritual

values with the interests of the community.

In 1995 I returned to the U.S. and attended graduate school in applied anthropology. My thesis experimented with a collaborative research process in telling the story of how parents transformed through their involvement in a very innovative school-based family center (Oppenheim, 1999). I was hired as a program developer for the community organization that emerged from this process. Action research with community residents was utilized in the development of programs. Next I worked on an action research project, understanding how students, student leaders, teachers, and community volunteers worked together in creating a supportive community for academic success at a local high school.

Through my PhD program in Transformational Learning and Change at California Institute of Integral Studies I began to learn how to integrate participatory research methods with the social and spiritual philosophy of Ananda Marga and Proutist Universal. I facilitated school-based collaborative trainings and conferences integrating art, music and experiential exercises, and even invited several Ananda Marga monks and nuns to participate. Through this process participants were able to listen and dialogue on a meaningful level. This would become the foundation for future projects where students, teachers, parents and agency staff worked together.

I began to feel that work of Proutist Universal in the U.S. could benefit greatly through the application of participatory methods and the accompanying process of relationship building, dialogue and application of knowledge to real world issues. We could come to discover our own values and style of PAR that reflected our spiritual philosophy as well the philosophy of social transformation termed *PROUT* (*PROUT* stands for the Progressive Utilization Theory, and integrates personal spiritual upliftment with social transformation through regional self-determination and cooperative economics, protection of local environments, cultures and languages, and a strategy for global cooperation).

In the fall of 2001 I facilitated a retreat based on PAR for our organization in Los Angeles. Similar to the Ozarks, we had a retreat center. After team-building exercises and dialogue about our own experiences and values of activism, several local activists discussed their work. The following day, we broke into teams to analyze issues presented the previous day and apply our social principles in discussing solutions. We came up with a plan to form a cooperative as a way to counter globalization, unite with like-minded groups, and to increase the role our retreat center could play in demonstrating an alternative future for the region (While a leadership team met several times to plan this cooperative, the idea has since lapsed, due largely to the fact of my own ill health and other commitments that prevent my leadership of this project.).

That summer I attended our national spiritual retreat at our Ozarks center. There, we had several workshops with my friends in Proutist Universal. The workshops engaged us in thinking about how global exploitation impacted our lives, and we had several experiential exercises linking our somatic and emotional lives to the ideals of the PROUT philosophy. However a discussion emerged about how to relate our philosophy and work to projects for transformation in our communities. At the end of the retreat Allan and I shared our perceptions. We were in agreement about the challenges facing our organization, and regretted the fact that while we had come to this center for decades, we had never really connected with the local community our with the Ozarks region. Our plans to facilitate a PAR training the following summer began to take shape, and after the retreat we communicated regularly. I shared with him my knowledge of PAR, and we probed deeper into the reasons and objectives for the training.

The classical reason cited for PAR is a perceived need or problem on the part of an oppressed or exploited people. For Whyte (2001) the initial problem or question arises as an itch or a spark – there is a persistent or critical question to be answered or a social context to be explored in order for transformation or emancipation from oppression to occur.



For us the initial itch or problem was the worldview through which we viewed and experienced the community around our retreat center as well as the worldview through which the larger community experienced us. While members of the local community often referred to us as “orange people” and it was rumored that we kidnapped children, we experienced the Ozarks through the lens of the “spiritual tourist.”

Another itch was the need for us to work together as a team – we came from all over the U.S. and had never learned to work together. As a consequence our discussions were usually more theoretical than practical - we needed to learn to bring our social philosophy to life in the real world.

I first came to this center in 1982, then after more than twenty-five years overseas, came back again in 1999, 2000, and 2001, and 2002. However I cannot really say that I came to the Ozarks, because I would land in St Louis or Kansas City and quickly drive to the retreat, never really even leaving to visit the local community, except to buy a quick snack at the local health food store. Most of our members did the same thing. We came to the region to get our own spiritual needs fulfilled while ignoring and shutting out the larger Ozarks community. My colleague had similar experiences but had increasingly ventured out of the retreat center to explore the Ozarks region. Occasionally he would stay in a local hotel and began to talk with local residents, explored local historical sites, and visited the Mark Twain National Forest.

We agreed that our image of the local community was through the lens of the spiritual tourist, where most of our members “used” the local region for snack food, recreation in the local river, shopping for souvenirs and other typical tourist activities. Many members believed that local residents were all lily-white Christians, with many prejudices.

That we were tourists full of examined assumptions was ironic, since our social and spiritual philosophy is deeply embedded in the awareness and praxis of immersing ourselves in service to our communities, our region and to planet earth. In fact the name our guru designated

for these rural centers was “master units” signifying that should become regional centers for rural revitalization movements – rebuilding local economies, showing examples of ecological sustainability.

Many local community members also gazed at us from a similar but very different stereotypical lens, based on appearance and superficial behavior, and their assumptions about who we were. We were most often called the “orange people,” and local teenagers had been vandalizing the property for years. They thought that we were lizard worshippers, because there was a very large concrete lizard on our children’s’ playground. When one of our orange clad nuns had a flat tire, two local folks pulled over to help and told her that they had heard that we kidnapped and killed people.

A large contingent of our group were volunteers for Proutist Universal, the social activist arm of our movement, which opposed capitalism with an alternative vision of society, combining the development of cooperatives with sustainable economic regions. We had been coming together at national retreats for over thirty years, but somehow had never really gotten to know each other deeply, or ever worked on a project together. Our meetings remained highly theoretical, and we each had our own notions and idiosyncratic visions and projects for implementing our vast social philosophy on a practical level. The training should give us a foundation to strategically plan for the application of our philosophy to real world problems.

In setting the stage for the training in PAR at our spiritual community, my co-facilitator and I had three goals in mind in developing our own *pensamiento propio* of social transformation. This would be the underlying culture or ideology of social transformation that would structure the more outward process of community engagement with the Ozarks region. These goals included:

- (1) Linking our own teachings of social liberation with the writings of Paulo Freire and popular education and the basic tenets of participatory action research;

- (2) Facilitating a group process that would integrate our spiritual practices and philosophy with our social philosophy in crafting our own “indigenous” vision of PAR – linked to fieldwork in the Ozarks, and
- (3) Creating a group awareness and dialogue about our emergent style of PAR.

### Integrating PROUT, Popular Education and PAR

The work of Paulo Freire was significant in linking our philosophy to the field of popular education and to PAR. A key theme in the writings of Paulo Freire is to raise one’s consciousness above the prescribing influences of colonization:

One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prescription. Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. (Freire, 1995, p 29).

The preceptor of our social philosophy, P.R. Sarkar, defined the philosophy of PROUT in a historical moment in India quite similar to that of Paulo in Brazil. Both were writing to counteract the psychological imprint of exploitation that was left in the wake of colonial empires from which independence had been recently achieved. While the more visible form of the colonizer was no longer present, the structures of oppression remained in the economic tyranny of large corporations and government corruption. Here is Sarkar speaking about the psychological exploitation of the colonizer:

You will find that in each case of economic exploitation, psychic exploitation was the foundation: if you go deep into the background, you will discover a continuous and cunning attempt to create inferiority complexes in the minds of the exploited. (Sarkar, 1999, p 50).

Freire’s project of liberation was to encourage marginalized people to create the world anew through grounding their knowledge and beliefs in their own daily experiences of life, in

contrast to imposed forms of knowledge, based on a liberatory love for all humanity:

To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namer as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in words in work, in action –reflection (p. 9).

Sarkar also emphasizes the liberation of intellect, through rational inquiry about psychological and economic oppression, the expansion of love to the entire created universe, and pursuing an inward personal sense of truth under the concept of *Neohumanism*:

You must create opportunities for all people to judge everything in the light of truth. Liberate the intellect of each and every person (1999, p 77).

To liberate society from this unbearable situation, (when bureaucracy is turned into oligarchy), consciousness will have to be aroused among the people; their eyes will have to be opened by knowledge. Let them understand the what's the why's and the where's. Thus study is essential, very essential (1999, p 54).

While Freire believes that true liberation is based on love, of all humankind, and even the oppressor, with Sarkar, love is specifically defined as the ability to rise above limiting sentiments and to embrace a love and compassion that spreads to all the beings – human, animal as well as the inanimate. Human society is then defined as a collective movement to create a society based on this expanded love:

. . .the endeavor to advance towards the ultimate reality by forming a society free from all inequalities, with everyone of the human race moving in unison is called “sama-samaja” tattva (1999, p. 41).

Freire's project was to reflect upon key themes in the daily life of exploited factory workers. Looking at these experiences and dialoguing about what liberation would feel like, the process began for social liberation. Freire encouraged the oppressed to embrace their oppressors; else they would repeat the same oppression themselves. Love would then guide their hearts and minds towards liberation.

With Sarkar, intuitional practice is the grounding of both social and spiritual liberation.

Here members utilize the process of meditation in associating their minds and hearts with compassionate love that has the capability of rising above ensnaring psychic traps.

Participatory action research is a process that evolves in situ. Participants evolve new knowledge and collective action based on their shared experiences, common values that arise, and processes that are indigenous to the group. In opposition to imposed and prescribed ways of knowing, an emergent ideology, the *pensamiento propio*, represents the indigenous worldview of activism.

Similarly, to Sarkar, social transformation must be grounded upon and revitalize local culture. Culture is the *élan vital*; the vital historical force under girding the spirit of collectivity, and a cosmology that has evolved from relationship with the living earth in communion with other human beings:

It is proper for human beings to struggle for political freedom, for social emancipation; but if their cultural backbone is broken, then all their struggles will end in nothing. – Like offering ghee into a fire that has died out (1999, p. 58).

PAR is such a process that merges an ideology of liberation with a knowledge creation process:

It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

The aim of Participatory action research is to change practices, social structures, and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice, and unsatisfying forms of existence (Reason and Bradbury, p 1).

### Integrating our Social Philosophy and Spiritual Practices

The task for those of us in Proutist Universal was then to begin to evolve our own *pensamiento propio*, critical of the influences that colonize our thinking, connecting with our cultural roots, and linking our spiritual and social ideology to a grounded process of transformation. This process would naturally utilize and be based in philosophy of PROUT, a

social ideology providing a theory or vision for social transformation. As in Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy as well as with Smith's Maori praxis of Kaupapa and Whenua, PROUT provides tools for social analysis and the development of social strategies, rather than a prescriptive formula for social emancipation. Basic tenets of this ideology include:

*Intuition Science:* The ancient practice of *astanga yoga*, an integration of meditation, ethical values, and physical harmony. Intuition practices are essential in rising above individual entrapments and to expand compassion and universal love (see [www.anandamarga.org](http://www.anandamarga.org)).

*Neohumanism:* As discussed above, the practice of rising above oppressive psychologies and melding universal love for the creation to the process of social liberation (Sarkar, 1999).

*Samaja:* The concept or spirit of society, as a collective movement of people towards common goals. Samaja integrates the strength of local language and culture, and the merger of collective responsibilities and interests. Local samaja movements are often linked to geographical areas and ethnic groups (see [www.prou.org](http://www.prou.org)).

*Sadvipra:* PROUT's concept of leadership as self-less social activists who rise above individual ambitions and merge with the spirit of collective society. Relevant here is PROUT's analysis of social class, encapsulated in the theory of social cycles, where a predominant psychological worldview (for example, the warrior as guardian, merchant class, intellectual or oppressed working class is critical to understanding social oppression in a particular culture or historical epoch) predominates in a given society or in a particular historical epoch. The potential of the *sadvipra* is to embody the highest qualities of each psychological disposition as an eclectic leader (see [www.prou.org](http://www.prou.org)).

*Economic Democracy and Decentralization:* Much of PROUT's socio-economic and social change strategy is comprised of the following dynamics that integrate regional self-reliance into a system of global cooperation (see Sarkar, 1992 for a comprehensive review):

- *Cooperative Economics:* While collective resources are guarded and

organized on a regional level, cooperative economics (locally owned and run consumer and producer cooperatives) is seen as the fundamental fabric of economic democracy.

- *Quadro-dimensional Economics*: Sarkar encourages social activists to consider psycho economics – or the ethical and psychological atmosphere of work; peoples economics – the ability for people to satisfy their basic needs and have reliable access to produced goods, commercial economics – where production and distribution is tied to developing the most efficient process and the most effective and cost effective means to benefit all people, and general economy – which integrates cooperatives, small scale cooperative industries, and regionally governed industries that govern the use of natural resources – trees, water, oil, and minerals to prevent the domination of wealthy industrialists.
- *Balanced Economic Planning*: For local economic sustainability as well ecological balance, a vibrant economy is looked at through the lens of an equilibrium amongst the agricultural, industrial, service, and retail sectors: an over-industrialized region is over-urbanized and environmentally destructive, for example
- *Integrated Development Projects* – projects that demonstrate regional economic principles, as well as conservation practices.
- *Prama*: Translated as dynamic equipoise and equilibrium is an over arching dynamic of the integration of society’s spiritual, intellectual and physical needs and potentials as well as a sense of equilibrium on all social levels, the ecological, cultural and economic, and the individual and collective, for example (Sarkar, 1992, pp. 40-57).

How were these tenets utilized in developing the training? My co-facilitator and I briefly touched on much of these concepts through our preparation. We had intentions to integrate them more thoroughly than could actually occur in the short time we had available. To briefly review their relevance to our training: We have already discussed how the philosophy of Neohumanism was essential in developing the training. Intuition Science was integrated through the practice of short meditations and chanting as sessions began, and very importantly through the discussion of using spiritual ideation or outlook in developing teamwork and in interacting with the community. We were also aware of the concept of kosas, or levels of mind (including the creative, intellectual, collective, spiritual, and universal) in developing activities that addressed various ways of knowing and experiencing ourselves and the world around us. The notion of samaja was the key concept orienting our PAR to the Ozarks as a region, attentive to the local cultural values and history. Principles of economic democracy and decentralization were utilized (and unfortunately just touched upon at the actual training because of lack of time) as tools to analyze the cause of social strengths and weaknesses. They were also touched upon in brainstorming solutions.

In taking all of the above into consideration, Freire's popular education, the field of critical pedagogy, the key themes of PAR as well as the components and strategy of PROUT, Fals-Broda and Rahman seem to have hit the mark by providing four focuses for the knowledge creation process of PAR (2001, pp 8-9). We would rely on these extensively in crafting the details of our training curriculum:

The first is collective research: the investigation of social realities with a sense of collective dialogue – inquiry into the daily lives and experiences of people and developing a group consciousness.

Second is the critical recovery of history: collecting the insider story of history, popular stories and accounts, looking to elders and those whose voices may be silent.



The third element is valuing and applying folk culture - local values and feelings about the past present and future. Also included are valuing local cultures of art, recreation, music, and drama.

The final tenet is the production and diffusion of new knowledge: incorporating new styles and ways of knowledge and action into a group and community. New groups and ways of action emerge, as well as new styles of knowledge through group talents and styles of knowing, for example, art, music, drama, and written products.

Dialogue and Reflection.

Reflecting and evaluating experience is an essential process in becoming more conscious and intentional about one's actions. In engaging our members in reflecting upon how prout would integrate with PAR and how we could create our *pensamiento propio*, we believed that a final dialogue session was critical. Here we designed questions relating to how the experience related to the initial passionate questions and problems, how well participants were able to relate our social philosophy to the training, how effective they felt a similar process might be in their own communities, and goals they identified for future trainings and work together.

The Setting: Ananda Kanan - The Ananda Marga Ozarks Retreat Center

The *Ananda Kanan* (Sanskrit for "garden of bliss) spiritual retreat center is the national retreat center for Ananda Marga. Located approximately seventy-five miles east of Springfield Missouri, Ananda Kanan is twenty miles south east of West Plains, the nexus for small rural townships in a hundred mile radius. In the heart of the southern Ozarks in south central Missouri, the area is typical of much of the Ozarks, near dense forest, vast pasturelands, and

rambling rivers. Our site features a lake, large pastures, and a forested area. The facilities feature extensive dormitories; dining and meeting facilities and can serve over three hundred people.

The center hosts our large semi annual retreats, bi-monthly meetings of our contingent of monks and nuns from across the world who work in “New York Sector” (Globally, Ananda Marga is divided into nine sectors or regions, and New York Sector contains North and Central America and the countered of the Caribbean), an annual alternative spring retreat for spiritually minded college students, and occasionally hosts retreat for local grass roots organizations, such as the Ozarks Area Action Council. A senior Ananda Marga monk with a junior monk assisting him, and several volunteers who help maintain the grounds manages most the time the center. Often members of Ananda Marga, or an occasional additional monk or nun stop by to repair their cars while on cross-country trips, to seek spiritual renewal, or to enjoy the satsaunga (spiritual company).

Adjacent to the property is land held by the founder of this retreat center, with a two-story house, garage, and art gallery. This member is a landscape and portrait artists who is rapidly becoming known in the Ozarks for naturalistic murals commissioned by local townships or public schools.

### Pre-planning and Preparation

In late spring, 2001 we began sketching out a proposal for our process to present to the leadership board of Proutist Universal in the U.S. We had formal approval to go ahead towards the end of winter, 2002. It would take until just a week before the training to finalize the exact dates and time that we would have available for the training – there were time conflicts with other programs essential to the retreat and the meetings planned for PROUT. The training would

be held the first four days, followed by a purely spiritual retreat the next three. The amount of time we initially planned needed to be diminished, because there were other activities planned for the members of Proutist Universal. The experience could not possibly do justice to our original vision or to the integrity of participatory action research. It would be a taste of the experience, and training about the concepts and tools of PAR, as well as a dialogue and reflection tool in shedding new light on how PROUT could be used for social transformation.

Through our dialogue, we both came to appreciate our different angles on the process. He was more interested and experienced in the analytical or fact-finding aspect of the process, where I was more focused on the process of relationship building and experiential learning. We began to track down information and contacts for the Ozarks over the Internet. It was easy to track down statistics and demographic information from state departments and research conducted by the extension services of the University of Missouri. Early in spring, we began to call contacts and arrange for meetings. I was to meet with the student head of the ecology club at the local university, an extension of Southwest Missouri State University, as well as the director of the Ozarks Bioregional Council. He had contacted and had meetings planned with the Ozarks Action Agency and the extension officer from the University of Missouri. At the same time we dialogued about the key goals and concepts for the training.

We arrived three days before the training to do advanced field research. I met with contacts, learning about community sites to visit. We visited the public library to locate local historical and demographic data and found a number of visitors at the library that were happy to talk about their personal experiences and insights. We visited several agencies, arranging meetings, collecting information, and traveled around the region several times – observing where people socialized, shopped and worked. I also find it interesting to visit the local cemeteries. It turned out that there were many neighborhood graveyards, where a small network of families would bury their relatives. At the library we were learning that West Plains had long been a

nexus for local trade.

As we hurriedly made photocopies of documents, assembled our field kits for each group to use, coordinated meetings in the community, and sat down to orchestrate the details of our training, we were making final adjustments with other scheduled events at the retreat. With our busy working schedules during the year it was hard for the two of us to do justice to the passion we felt for this process and the interest demonstrated by the members of our organization.

The PAR training would be part of the four-day training for members of Proutist Universal (At the retreat, the first four days were dedicated to training programs with three of the many trades of departments of Ananda Marga – education, disaster relief were the other two) as well as activities for children and people new to Ananda Marga.) Our part of the Proutist Universal Training would be comprised of five two to three hour program slots divided into eight sessions.

The Ozarks PAR Training, June 28 – July 1, 2002

There were twenty-eight participants in our workshop. They arrived at our retreat center from across the U.S., Mexico, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Germany, and one participant was a recent refugee from the Congo, a fellow anthropologist who was staying with me in Los Angeles. They came from a wide variety of ethnicities with avocations including a professor of geography at Florida State University, an adjunct economics professor, the owner of a health foods supermarket, several alternative business-owners, free-lance writers, engineers, undergraduate and graduate students, the director of a large activist non-profit organization, and several monks and one nun from our spiritual organization. There was an approximate balance in gender with ages ranging from eighteen to late fifties.

## Session One: Introduction

On the morning of the first day of the retreat, we learned that the presenter of the morning program had not arrived from the East Coast, so we had to jump into action. My co-presenter was off in town following up contacts. We began with a short spiritual chant and meditation.

After an overview of our program, we discussed the “initial itch;” the passion and purpose behind doing the workshop. This included the feeling we had as spiritual tourists, the need to link PROUT to practical action, and the need to evolve teamwork in the organization. Participants shared their own perceptions and experiences of these issues. I discussed the work of Paulo Freire, and the basic tenets of participatory action research. I was especially careful to tie quotes from Freire to the writings of our spiritual preceptor, P.R. Sarkar from his book: *Liberation of Intellect: Neohumanism*.

We discussed the lens of participatory action research through which our own philosophy could be woven into a participatory process. PAR was a relational process, in which participants evolved relationships amongst themselves through the process and then mirrored this process with the community. Emphasized was Freire’s purpose of rising above prescriptive ways of knowing, constructing new ways of experiencing and dialoguing about social life. The idea of *pensamiento propio* was briefly defined – that each group developed its own ideology or cosmology of activism, based on its own value system and the development of its distinct learning community. I reviewed a few tenets of PROUT as tools to analyze social conditions, rather than as theoretical concepts as prescriptions for a future society.

## Session Two – Group Process and Teamwork Development

In this session we experienced group process exercises to become more conscious of the relational nature of PAR. Here I utilized Jacob Moreno's concept of *sociogram* and *socio-drama* in designing exercises to develop a sense of teamwork and to appreciate individual learning styles and values (see web site: *Social Network Analysis: A Handbook by John Scott Sociometric Analysis and Graph Theory*, p 8). I briefly related the exercises to the yogic notion of kosas mentioned in an earlier section of this paper.

The exercises were designed to see how participants related spatially to one another. We set out a long line of masking tape and participants were asked where they stood on a continuum that at one end represented the value of being goal oriented and at the opposite end, the value of being process oriented. As they stood on the line, we asked each other what that meant for us in our daily lives. One member was a musician and felt completely process oriented; he said that he just enjoyed the feeling of being creative. Our nun was entirely goal oriented and valued having clear tasks and outcomes. Other questions included whether participants were primarily verbal, kinesthetic, visual or auditory learners, whether they learned better with greater autonomy or collectivity, and whether they preferred working with collective decision-making or through a higher authority. I sensed that participants were beginning to see new aspects to many people we had known for over twenty years. Participants were reminded to think about these differences as they planned their fieldwork – to build on each person's talents and strengths, and to validate the fact that each person might place a higher value on different types of knowledge in the community. For example, some might privilege analytical fact finding, while another might find greater value in having a more intimate talk with a community member. I remarked that the same awareness and appreciation of similarities and differences would help us understand the larger community.

### Session Three – Overview of the Ozarks

In the afternoon of the third day, co-facilitator Allan Rosen presented an overview of the Ozarks Region. He began with a discussion of the geography, the river systems, flora and fauna, and key themes in the region. Regional demographics were presented – there was a high rate of poverty, low high school graduation rates, a recent influx of retirement age populations, and several pressing ecological issues. Participants read aloud accounts from pioneer families about their struggles to survive, as well as passages from state reports about the natural splendor of the region and the themes of geographical isolation and the strong sense of family and community support.

The founding member of our spiritual community came into the session to present his experiences over the past twenty years. He is a landscape and mural artist who worked with local schools and civic groups in the region, and had a lot to share about local values and issues of concern. He felt that the locals were very family and community oriented, and that social networks were strongly connected to Baptist congregations. While people were poor, there was still a strong local barter economy. He told us that people were outgoing and friendly when we also extended our friendship. He played tennis and basketball with a local school principal as well as a preacher. But he cautioned that people might remain a little distant, hesitant to make friends with non-Christians that others might disapprove of. He shared several of his landscape paintings of dilapidated barns or tranquil creek side settings. He mentioned that he would like to work with other artists raising funds and awareness for environmental and historical preservation projects – badly needed in this area of changing demographics and outside business investments.

After this, another member talked about her plan to meet with local Native Americans. She shared her knowledge of the general history of Native American spirituality as well as the genocidal exploitation that Native Americans experienced.

## Session Four – Fieldwork Preparation

The following afternoon was our next session, preparing for fieldwork activities the following morning. Participants formed fieldwork teams on the topics of: Native Americans, ecology, family and poverty issues and economics. They would meet and plan a strategy to accomplish a number of tasks within a very short span of time – there was five hours to carry out this session.

Each team was given a fieldwork kit containing (1) resource materials on their topic – local maps, handouts from local agencies, data derived from the internet, and a list of local contacts; (2) a Polaroid camera (3) drawing pencils and paper to draw or take notes upon; and (4) a sample interview form which listed a few questions that would be common to all groups, with space for each group to write questions concerning their topics.

Teams shared the common goals of interviewing local experts on their topics, interviewing a sample of local residents, visiting a site relevant to their topic (For example, the ecology group could visit a waste dump site), and collecting informational materials to share with the group.

A major concern was how to introduce ourselves when conducting interviews. We were clear that rather than trying to inspire people about our philosophy, our purpose was to listen and observe the community. A consensus arose that we would present ourselves as students in a training seminar about the local region. As members of a social service organization, we wanted to learn about local issues in order to better serve the community in the future.

Our member from Mexico discussed her experiences conducting similar fieldwork in rural Mexico. She found it helpful for those participants to interview residents in pairs, one would conduct a formal interview and take notes with another when engage the person in a



friendly more open conversation to gain their confidence and sense of trust

Then each group went their separate way to strategize for their fieldwork, establishing roles and tasks and planning logistics such as transportation. When the teams returned from the field they would also need time to plan their presentations to the larger group.

#### Session Five – Fieldwork

Teams went out into the community on their own. Some enthusiastically left early in the morning, bringing food for lunch with them. We stayed back to plan the afternoon's session.

#### Session Six – Group Presentations

As the teams came back to the meeting room in the afternoon, we formed a circle, and reflected briefly on what had just occurred. This had been a hurried and perhaps at times frustrating experience, however it also must have had moments of excitement and fulfillment as well. Each team sat and further prepared for their presentations

The first group had focused on area economics. They had videotaped several interviews with local business owners and their meeting with the extension representative from the University of Missouri – held in Mountain View, a small town about fifteen miles north east of our center. Those interviewed talked about where they had grown up, their level of education and their history of work experience. Several people had stayed in the local community their entire lives, others had moved away and returned later. At the chamber of commerce there was optimism with extensive plans and activities for community improvement that included revitalizing the downtown area, holding local fundraisers, and starting a community center.

Key concerns from those interviewed included the struggle to achieve credit for business investment, farms not generating enough income to support families, and a looming tax crisis, where funds may not be available to support local programs. Strengths mentioned were the local

informal economy and the spirit of community and family support. One participant in the fieldwork who was a university student remarked “It was exciting because we were actually seeing what people needed.” The group felt that agency staff were very open to our social philosophy and had many beliefs and values in common with our own.

The second group visited two Native American centers in West Plains. Local Cherokee leaders spoke of the “trail of tears” the long forced march of the Cherokee to reservations, and how they settled in Missouri. They spoke of their spiritual values and of the sweat lodge. The original spring that Native Americans gathered near actually flowed underneath the center. There were conflicts with the local community; for example, the town council preferred initially to sell the building that would become their center to a local church for \$90,000, when they had offered to pay \$300,000.

The Ananda Marga nun who accompanied the group felt that many of the values and practices of the Cherokee were similar to indigenous peoples in India. Participants were deeply touched by this experience; it was the first time many participants had ever talked to a Native American about their spirituality as well as their struggles. The center leaders shared their plans for introducing bilingual education programs.

At the same time that many of the group members visited these centers, another participant in was interviewing local residents about their attitudes towards Native Americans. There was a consensus that they deserved to have their original lands returned and to have respect and support for their culture.

The third group met first at the Ozarks Action Center to investigate family and poverty issues. The agency worked extensively with local residents, holding community surveys and facilitating focus groups. There was a quote on the wall that caught everyone’s eye that reinforced the center’s mission to build local capacity: “Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the Ark (referring to Noah), professionals built the Titanic.”

The director of the agency presented an educational video on the working poor. Local counties averaged about 23% below the poverty level, twice the average in the rest of Missouri. Others lived just above the poverty and lacked access to basic services, because they were not technically poor. Many senior citizens fell into this category. There were high incidences of child abuse, too many low paying jobs, lack of proper housing, a low percentage of high school graduates going on to higher education, a rapidly increasing prison population, lack of sufficient job training, healthcare choices or recreational opportunities. There were significant numbers of women who were parents below the age of 18.

After this meeting, teams of three went into the community to interview residents. They went to the downtown plaza, a local park and the Wal-Mart on the outskirts of town. Outside the music store in the town plaza they were surprised to hear a tape of spiritual chanting from our spiritual organization playing. Evidently, appreciation of our movement was much wider than many had expected.

Business owners had to adapt quickly to the opening of the Wal-Mart if they were to survive. One owner converted his hardware store to antiques. Many interviewed lamented the loss of local culture, and the yearning to preserve the small town atmosphere. An elderly couple interviewed in the park felt that few people knew their neighbors and that national fast food chains had replaced local restaurants, where people prepared food themselves. People expressed that both teens and the elderly were least well served in the community. Teens did not have much to do in their free time; they drank and play video games. Social life was shopping at Wal-Mart or going to church.

One woman remarked that people in general were afraid of we orange people. She suggested that we make a flier explaining who we were for locals.

The final group to present concerned the local environment. All participants first visited the State of Missouri Conservation Center in West Plains. There agency staff discussed the

history of environmental issues in the area – deforestation caused soil erosion, which led to an extensive presence of stones in creeks and rivers. This then led to a decline in local fish and fresh water crustaceans. Hunting led to the decline of local deer mammal populations.

The establishment of the Missouri Conservation authority brought new funds and power to the protection of animal species and the renewal of the forests and rivers. Because of this there has been an inspiring recovery of local ecosystems. The agency was holding local town meetings discussing environmental issues and has started a stream-watch volunteer program.

Recent problems are caused by the rapid growth of new businesses. Unfortunately recent funding cuts and a predicted tax crisis may seriously impair the work of this center.

The group then split into groups, interviewing residents about their attitudes towards the environment. A teen took participants behind his house that bordered the small creek that went through West Plains. There was garbage thrown into the creek bed, and the teen remarked that people lacked any real concern for the creek. There was a consensus that people were less concerned about environmental issues as their own survival.

## Session Seven – Summary and Synthesis of Key Themes

After a few minutes of stretching, teams would meet to synthesize what they had experienced into key themes. For this session, residents of our retreat center were invited as well as other members who had not participated in the workshops of Proutist Universal.

First we briefly reviewed several tenets of PROUT that might give us insight into the issues that participants experienced. One principle that seemed especially relevant was balanced economic planning (Sarkar, 1992, pp33-39). A sustainable economy and one that was in harmony with the environment had a balanced involvement in agriculture, industry, services, and

retail trade. In the Ozarks it was evident that the earlier agricultural economy was giving way to a growing retail trade, where imported products sold in the local Wal-mart usurped locally produced goods, leading to the impoverishment of local farms and the closure of local industries and stores. Another principles of PROUT was the encouragement of economic cooperatives (1992, pp. 128 – 145). In the Ozarks it seemed like the long history of neighborly cooperation could easily be utilized in strengthening a local economic infrastructure.

Representatives from each group then wrote down their common issues on the wall.

These were divided into strengths and problems or critical issues:

#### Local strengths

The resident's love of local culture, home and sense of place.

The strong survival strategies that people utilized, including the sense of support and informal economy.

The importance people placed on education.

The way agencies had developed town meetings.

A sense of optimism.

The fact that there was a renewal of ecosystems.

The openness of the Native Americans.

The strong sense of family and the sense of collectivity.

#### Local problems and critical issues

The need to utilize local resources and plant local vegetation.

Aging demographics that impacted local resources – healthcare and housing, for example.

The fear of exploitation by outside business interests...

Several looming crises – poverty, lack of local infrastructure.

Lack of coordinated planning between various agencies and levels of government.

The lack of meaningful employment.

An absence of living wages.

A lack of job training.

The clash between old and new values.

The lack of long-term investment.

Women's welfare – sufficient healthcare and family support.

The need for educational initiatives, especially for indigenous people to learn their languages.

We then quickly distilled this list into concise inclusive themes that included: poverty and family issues, education and training, ecological awareness, and economic exploitation as problem areas, and sense of family and collectivity and the informal economy as shared

strengths.

Our participant from Mexico then spontaneously talked about how she was working with the Zapatistas in Mexico to elevate the awareness of the impact of globalization on indigenous people. She said that people in Missouri were part of the same chain of events. There was an industrial corridor, running from the industrial cities of the northeast U.S. through the south and into Central and South America. Here, cheap labor was exploited in maquilas in the global south for the benefit of consumers and wealthy corporations in the north.

In Mexico they (the Zapatistas) are trying to create an anti movement to develop an economy to counter the influence of [corporations such as] Wal-Mart. The hope of indigenous peoples is that we here [in the U.S.] wake up. They are paying 20 cents per hour [in Mexico]; there is a tremendous impact on the environment. In California, they (activists) are starting to boycott sweatshop products.

Roughly translation of Spanish through an interpreter

A participant asked how this was relevant to what were seeing in Missouri. We brought up the point that opportunities for employment were escaping the area, while corporations could exploit cheap labor in Central America. This indeed could be the cause of younger people fleeing the area. One of the principles in our social philosophy was that local resources should be developed into finished goods in the local region, and these products used to fulfill the basic necessities of local residents first before being exported from the region.

I used this discussion to point out that the very purpose of this training was to see how the principles of our philosophy could be utilized and analytical tools to understand local problems and begin to dialogue about solutions. This was not a prescriptive process, but a slowly evolving dialogue with local residents – elevating our sense of partnership and understanding with local residents, at the same time, utilizing our philosophy to better understand the causes of problems, at the same time seeking avenues for coming up with local solutions. Participants had learned through the experience that people naturally came up with solutions and strategies that were in

harmony with our philosophy – the idea of promoting cooperatives, focusing on local economic self-reliance, sustaining ecosystems, and supporting local cultures were all fundamental principles our spiritual preceptor had discussed in the late 1950's, when he stressed the importance of linking social activism to the process of spiritual fulfillment.

There was not enough time to thoroughly discuss an action plan and to further link the principles of our philosophy to what we had experienced in a didactic way. Participants briefly shared ideas for utilizing what we had learned and possible next steps. There was a consensus that agencies we visited were keenly interested in learning about our findings. There was also an interest in sharing what we found with the larger membership of our organization at the retreat site. I mentioned that in the future, there would be several opportunities for volunteer involvement to develop a closer relationship with local residents. We could join the local stream watch group, for example. The facilitator of the Native American group mentioned that she had invited the director of one of the centers to give a presentation at our evening cultural program. Seven people volunteered to assemble our materials and develop a booklet or presentation about what we had learned to share with our own organization and the local community. I had mentioned earlier that I felt that local schools and the library would probably appreciate these materials.

#### Session Eight - Graduation and Final Reflection

The conclusion of the training was a graduation ceremony, presided by the global head of Proutist Universal who happened to be at our spiritual retreat. The local head of our organization in New York Sector congratulated the participants on their work, and each participant received a certificate of completion. However before this, we again stood in a circle and reflected upon what we had learned in the training. We would reflect on the initial passionate questions, what

we had learned through the process, and what people suggested for the future. I asked participants questions such as: How the experience had helped them learn about each other as well as the community? If the experience had helped them better understand how to utilize our social philosophy in the real world? What they had felt and experienced during the fieldwork? Had been prepared before going into the field? Answers fell into the following themes:

I. Shifting Assumptions – Participants had shifted their assumptions and gained insights about local residents:

Today I discovered the third world inside the USA. People are afraid of newcomers, of the big corporations coming to their area, of losing their culture and they are all European, from European ancestry and they are afraid of all these rich people coming and they feel like so little, and smashed. That's something I didn't know about; it's a discovery for me.

Anthropologist from the Congo

This participant was a political refugee, arrested in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, held in military detention, and finally making it to a refugee camp in the country of Benin. In the PAR process, he adopted the role of listener and observer, and realized that his assumptions of European heritage Americans as a seemingly homogenous empowered group shifted dramatically. Another participant shifted her assumption that locals were prejudiced towards minorities:

Before we went out I was worried about asking the white people in the streets about how they felt about indigenous people . . . because I thought they would be as racist as I imagined they were. But after I heard the feedback from (a participant who interviewed people in town about their attitudes of indigenous peoples), I was really pleased. It changed my perceptions of the people here in a very positive way.

Director of member-run social action agency



Participants also shifted their fears and assumptions about the process itself:

For me in the beginning I thought it would be difficult. This particular place we are in, Ananda Kanan, and to go outside, and interact with these people, and I thought it would be difficult, so I was completely wrong, so unless we go and meet people we cannot [know].

Participant from Portugal

## II. How the community observed us.

Some views reinforced our notions of how the community viewed us - as orange people in a cult, capable of inhuman actions and aloof from the community. In an interview with a person in town, one woman remarked that it was widely believed that before we arrived, there was a group practicing witchcraft and that we were continuing the practice. It was believed that we were people that stayed inside and rarely left our property.

### Shifting our relationship with the community.

A theme that recurred in participants' reflections were that many people interviewed shared many principals of our social philosophy – there was a natural and common value system waiting to be cultivated:

Talking to this nice indigenous couple for me and also with the other experiences for me, there are a whole bunch of people out there who have the same ideas that we have as Proutists. They also want to connect, they also want to build up a network, and work together with other groups with the same ideas.

Engineer from Germany

## IV. Learning from the Experience.

There were barriers to overcome in the process. Clearly, many participants had not connected our vast philosophy with the basics of community organizing before:

The thing that I found that was inspiring was learning how easy it is to make a phone call and make a connection real fast, to go over there just to find out their qualities what they're doing and how they are doing their work.

Participant from Missouri now living in Columbia

#### V. Linking our philosophy to practical action.

It's a great way to know the problems in your community, while giving people some dignity, some respect. Everybody loves to talk about what they are into. It's a nice [and] humble way for us to get involved in our communities.

Business owner

#### VI. Participants felt that the process developed a spirit of teamwork and the beginning of a learning community:

Also, very important, we learned about the community and also very important we learned about each other, how we all work, [and] what our capacities are.

Ananda Marga monk

#### VII. Participants saw the relevancy of the experience to issues and potential projects in their respective communities.

The woman from Puerto Rico saw the problem of the encroachment of multinational corporations in the Ozarks as occurring in her own country. She felt that she could return with a clearer idea of how to address these issues. Another member felt that the Ananda Marga retreat center in Germany could benefit from the same process:

To me it's a great inspiration for Germany. We're in the same boat. In Germany our retreat center, we have it in a small village.

Engineer from Germany

#### VIII. Reflections about the training process.

There was a consensus that the trainings had been beneficial and insightful, and there was an interest to continue this type of training and community involvement. The greatest insight was gained through the field experience itself. There really was a change in consciousness – many understanding for the first time how our philosophy could be translated into action. People appreciated what they had learned from the regional overview, it had helped

them prepare for fieldwork, and it was mentioned that the team building exercises had helped them learn about one another.

There were also several suggestions for improving the training. More time was needed to engage in effective fieldwork, and many participants felt ill prepared for introducing themselves to local residents. There was a suggestion for each team to have its own trained facilitator as well as more time in the beginning of the training for participants to get to know each other. Few participants recalled the discussion and presentation on the first morning about the connection between theories of popular education and critical pedagogy – there was a strong consensus that participants preferred to learn through action rather than through discussions of concepts. Also, the other aspects of our PROUT workshop (part of the overall program involved presentations from other people) were not integrated or related to the PAR process. These included a presentation of our theory by the director of Proutist Universal in New York Sector and a slide show from about the Global Forum recently held in Brazil. These were very relevant and in the future, could well serve an integrated training.

#### IX. Ideas for future work together.

Participants enthusiastically wanted to hold similar trainings in their local communities. Seven people volunteered to help organize these events, however there was reluctance for them to help facilitate the trainings themselves – they needed more training. An agreement arose to include a similar training in the global conference of Proutist Universal that would be held at the same site the following year. There was interest in holding a concert to benefit local agencies and initiatives at this conference (one of the members of our organization was a nationally renowned fiddle player – what Ozarks resident would turn down the opportunity to hear her play?), and an idea to hold a community forum on the Ozarks at a local community center. Also regarding continued participation locally, there was a reiteration of interest in compiling what we

had learned and sharing this with local agencies. One participant suggested that more permanent residents of our spiritual community participate in countywide events. Another suggestion was to participate in the community forums facilitated by the Missouri State Conservation Agency.

## Conclusion

Allan and I sat outside the house where our training seminar was held on a comfortable couch, discussing the often hectic experiences of the training. Allan felt that the experience was quite effective, but he was also concerned to address the suggestions that participants had for improvement. I felt uplifted by the enthusiastic participation, yet also tired from the demands of organizing and facilitating the training.

The experience had definitely brought the two of us closer together and we had begun to appreciate our common perspectives as well as where we diverged. We realized that it was important to encourage others with diverse experience and perspectives to bring new insights into the process, enriching the experience. We had clearly addressed the initial passionate questions that inspired the training, although it was obvious that lasting changes would take a more extensive commitment from ourselves as well as the members of Proutist Universal. We were encouraged by the interest shown by many participants in continuing the process in their local communities and made a commitment to each other to continue our partnership.

I believe that we can see features of an emerging *pensamiento propio* through the reflections of participants in the training. These features include:

- Learning in relationship and in appreciation of each other.
- Recognition and support of individual learning styles and value differences.
- Learning and acting in relationship with a wider community.
- Beginning to act through the lens of the regional approach of our social philosophy.
- Beginning to apply the principles of our social philosophy to the real world experience of community members.
- Beginning to apply our spiritual outlook – of universal compassion and spiritual ideation to activism.

Participants definitely shifted their perspectives and experiences away from the spiritual tourist model, and more towards a model of community engagement. They had become aware of their assumptions by listening to residents. We do not know if our process was shifting assumptions of residents as well. We do know that people in local agencies were delighted to cooperate with us and look forward to our contact in the future. In several cases they expressed that they felt commonality with our principles. We also know that we were learning how to engage with local residents much more in the way that they engage with one another – through friendly one on one contact and discussions about the things that matter to them. This is certainly a beginning for mutual understanding and appreciation. Like any true project of social engagement, locals want to see time proven commitments, so only time will tell how committed we become to the local community.

After the training I began to recognize that I felt very much at home in the Ozarks. I felt much closer to locals by listening and sharing with them. I also felt closer to my fellow participants. West Plains has a good deal in common with the home-town of my mother, Helena Arkansas. This city was now nearly a ghost town with the decline of the cotton industry, however people were very close to each other and I think very much effected by the serenity of a small town surrounded by much natural beauty. Virtually everyone that I knew also came from a small rural town, or rather their ancestors did. They did not leave by choice, but found their future in the rapid urbanization that is ubiquitous on our planet. I felt like the local issues in West Plains were very much my own issues. Through the PAR process I had really transformed in my relationship with the Ozarks as well as my own sense of personal mission and sense of place.

More than six months after the Ozarks PAR training the experience has two distinct but complementary courses for further reflection and action for me.

It is clear that the more outward PAR process as a project for training our members and engaging in activism was integral to yet distinct from the greater project of evolving our own praxis or *pensamiento propio* of PAR for Proutist Universal.

Facilitating PAR training is a focus on crafting an experience for a wide variety of our members. The priority for training and action are tangible skills to engage our members with our vast philosophy. As a collective process, there is a gradual evolution of a learning community that will have multiples stages of development. The first steps are holding pragmatic trainings, where members experience and reflect on the benefits gained and begin to dialogue about theory in action. From the final reflection session at the retreat, it is clear the learning experiences that will be remembered and passed on to others are about tangible experiences with people in the community rather than about theory or concepts and dynamics behind the process.

The project of training then becomes one of consciously creating an “atmosphere” of engagement. Here, the more obvious activism begins to create a climate in which participants reflect upon the less obvious theory and processes behind the training. We are creating, in Lev Vygotsky’s terms of the zone of proximal development (1978), an environment to nurture the potential of individuals to engage in the creation and reproduction of this learning environment themselves. Over time, the creation, maintenance and development of this learning community may well result in the creation of a true community-based *pensamiento propio*, one that is integral with the organization itself. Here I am inspired by the work of Barbara Rogoff (2001) and her co-authors who have told the story of the thirty year development of an alternative elementary school, where both the tacit and explicit knowledge of their learning community is perpetuated through the everyday experience of the participants. Here, I feel a calling back to the more traditional role of the anthropologist, in telling the story of this development in our own organization, listening attentively and sharing the stories that emerge from this everyday experience.

There are many challenges to the continuing evolution of this learning community of PAR. Our organization faces severe financial challenges. We also live far away from each other, and several months may go by without meeting or working together. I am however heartened by the existing folklore of activism in our organization. Several members who have been active in Proutist Universal over several decades often recall meaningful experiences and trainings long ago, where they walked the streets and met with other activist organizations, as well as several conferences and retreats where Native American leaders and progressive activists came to actively dialogue with us. This folklore can be added to and encouraged as a consistent collective memory through all the other struggles and challenges we face.

At the same time, the wider project of evolving the theory and praxis of PROUT as an indigenous praxis of PAR is complementary although separate. Here, there are several scholars and activists in our organization that are framing our philosophy as a distinct ontological and epistemological system. I am inspired by the work of futurist, Sohail Inayatullah and his work, *Understanding Sarkar: The Indian Episteme, Macrohistory and Transformative Knowledge* (2002). Inayatullah is addressing the comprehensive project of our philosophy, that of spiritual and social liberation in the context of historians and social philosophers from a variety of ontological and epistemological paradigms. He then is utilizing this dialogue in crafting his own global work in the field of social studies. My own task becomes a lifetime of a continued heuristics of mapping my own experiences, consciousness raising, research and praxis, and then sharing this in communion of other likeminded thinkers, both within Ananda Marga and Proutist Universal and the wider community of participatory facilitators and scholars.

Finally, I feel inspired to justify in clear terms the very purpose of this project. Sarkar, the founder of PROUT is also my own spiritual guide, and has given me deep insight and sense of purpose through several occasions of personal contact. At one point, he decided that Proutist Universal was not following its purpose in social transformation. He dismantled the

organization, and later re-organized it with the admonition that its members should be involved in direct service to society. In other words, our vast theory should be applied in action. At another time, he grounded our philosophy in the direction to: “Know the area, make a plan, and serve the people.”

Recent years are unfolding a vision of the future that can easily be seen as a worse case scenario; the starvation of millions, the lack of access to clean water, multinational corporations directly linked to murderous right wing death squads and third world squalor. Outside the Ananda Marga house where I write this, teenagers are murdered in broad daylight. In the wider Los Angeles community, forty percent of the population has no access to adequate healthcare and many of our high schools feature a forty percent dropout rate. Sadly both schools and hospitals are now declining due directly to the crippling of our State economy because of the corrupt practices of Enron Corporation.

There is a crucial need for focused activism, yet activism without vision and sustained transformation will lead nowhere. At the same time, a vast vision and inspiring idealism is problematic without real world pragmatism. It is precisely in the day-to-day struggle to unite theory with action, vision with pragmatism, love with a sense purpose, that true transformation will be fostered. The focus for this transformation is found in those communities of action whose members unite their passions and intentions with the real world of the neighborhoods around them. This transformation matures and evolves through the growth of a deep reflection and dialogue of action in relationship, where the growth and maturation of its members becomes a mirror within itself for the transformation of the world outside itself: I conclude by repeating Paulo Freire’s words:



To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namer as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in words in work, in action –reflection.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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