

*Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place.* By Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain and Mike Kesby. 2007. London and New York: Routledge. 260 pages. £75.00 (Hardback).

The contemporary academy is awash with targets, assessments and controls. The agenda pushed by those in the upper echelons of academia upon all staff and students is directly concerned with the factory-like production of profitable students and research projects that will contribute revenue and prestige to the institution, set according to assessment exercises designed with all the subtlety of a brick (see, for example, Wills, 2006; Sidaway, 1997; Bauder, 2006). Research is churned out of universities at an alarming rate in order to satisfy governing bodies and secure future funding, while administrative and teaching workloads continue to increase apace as wages and working conditions deteriorate. In the midst of this corporatisation – some might say ‘neo-liberalisation’ – of academia, an increasing number of radical and critical academics are quietly building an alternative agenda that, like the ‘Slow Food Movement’ in the culinary world, is a deliberate subversion of these prevailing market-based trends and an increasingly legitimate and popular alternative to them.

This alternative mode of academic endeavour is known as Participatory Action Research (PAR), and can trace its roots back more than seventy years. This volume, along with others in recent years (McTaggart [ed.], 1997; Reason and Bradbury, 2006) can be seen as a further move towards mainstream acceptance within geography and the broader social sciences. The editors of this book describe PAR as “involv[ing] researchers and participants working together to examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better”. (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007: 1). It is an approach to research that aims to be non-extractive and relevant to audiences other than the academy, such as community groups and policy makers in order to affect positive change. Just as importantly, PAR attempts to break down the privilege of the researcher, facilitating genuine input from participants throughout the research process in order to shape the research to the needs and priorities of those taking part.

From the start, the editors are clear about their agenda. They are PAR practitioners who are not afraid to expose the weaknesses of PAR and test its limits. This frank and honest self-criticality that is found throughout the book is a welcome breath of fresh air in academic research, and reflects the youth and openness of this approach. Indeed, a glance at the biographies of the dozens of writers who contributed to the book shows that many of them are PhD students who are only just beginning their academic careers. As such, when one speaks of the youth of PAR, one means it in both a conceptual and literal sense.

The book is divided into three main sections consisting of short, relatively accessible chapters. The first section grapples with the theory of PAR, its ethics and practical concerns around implementation and the oft-overlooked issue of researcher safety. The section part consists of short case studies and

recollections of a wide range of PAR experiences. These continue the frankness of opening chapters, bringing to light the complexities and nuances that can make or break a participatory project. Finally, several reflective chapters open up debates around the impacts and uses of PAR, including data analysis, learning and activist research.

The chapters cross-reference to each other throughout, attempting to give the book a sense of connection between chapters, but using the book as a resource to dip into is far better than trying to read it cover to cover which can be very difficult given its twenty-six chapters. It is easy to lose the individuality of each chapter since they are all so short and many cover similar topics. Nevertheless, the bibliography is extremely good, bringing together an impressive amount of further reading.

Despite the similarities of many chapters in terms of content and the issues discussed, it is worth noting how researchers provide different angles on similar questions surrounding PAR in this book. There is also a very broad range of techniques used within its pages, expressing the diversity and future potential of PAR as a research approach that can be applicable to a wide range of social and cultural contexts, methodological concerns and participant groups. This means that the book can be used as an occasional reference source and an introductory guide to good practice in PAR for specific research situations.

Unfortunately, aside from a small handful of chapters, the editors' understandable effort to ensure that the chapters remain short has meant that the majority fail to engage more than superficially on the nitty-gritty of the PAR process. The functional elements of the planning and carrying out of a PAR project, although not making for 'sexy' reading, would be incredibly useful when dealing with a new approach to research such as this. More discussions akin to those found in the pages of Blunt et al's (2003) *Cultural Geographies in Practice* would go a long way towards increasing the book's utility, while also demystifying such a marginal and emerging approach. Similarly, despite efforts to minimise obscure academic language, a number of the various authors slip back into the ghetto of academic lexicon from time to time.

Although critical and open discussions about the merits and drawbacks of PAR are admirable and refreshing, two political assumptions are almost entirely lacking from debate. Firstly, some of the fundamental elements of PAR involve the implicit assumption that participatory research is necessarily progressive. This book, although often ruthlessly critiquing other politics of the PAR research process, generally fails to engage with the political implications of PAR and how outcomes and actions might affect negatively upon participants and wider social and political dynamics. What if the participants of a PAR project came to the conclusion that all black residents should be evicted from a certain area of a city because they are perceived as causing crime? How can empowerment in this case be positive? What are the implications of such an approach on broader political and social conceptions of justice or equality?

Secondly, linked to this is a surprising paucity of debate around the concept of 'community'. It seems automatically implied that this vague term is a positive

force that is easily captured and territorialised without any interrogation of each individual community's nature or scope. Furthermore, there is a disquieting silence around the potentially exclusionary nature of community and how it can be used as a tool for reactionary and discriminatory activities and sentiments.

There is, nevertheless, a great deal to be said about this book. Its self-critical and (almost) comprehensive coverage of debates, concerns, problems, as well as practical advice regarding PAR research in geography is to be highly praised. Throughout, there is a notable emphasis on space and place, and urban geographers in particular will not be disappointed with various authors' imaginative attempts to engage with contemporary urban life through a PAR lens. Indeed, flexibility and adaptability are great bonuses of participatory methods.

The future of participatory approaches in geography will be an important one. The potential for emancipatory geographies to emerge from PAR only marginally surpasses the potential for PAR to play a major part in contesting the corporate university. Rachel Pain, Sarah Kindon and Mike Kesby have produced an important new contribution to the field that, despite some drawbacks, should play an important part in establishing PAR as a viable, relevant and rigorous mode of approaching research in geography.

*Anthony Ince*  
*Queen Mary, University of London*

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