

## Book Review

# **Action Research and democracy from the Scandinavian perspective**

Book Review by Telmo Adams, Paloma Daudt,  
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In the book *Action Research for Democracy*, dedicated to the late Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, who was the author, among other books, of *Action Research and Interactive Research. Beyond Practice and Theory* (2006), the editors start from the assumption that Democracy is a key concept for Action Research and democratisation is an immanent political dimension and a specific form of science. This perspective implies a change of paradigm recognising the participants in research as subjects and opens up a new way of thinking about the creation of knowledge. The organisers of the book propose to examine how Action Research deals with the problems related to democratic development and its fragilities in today's societies, in a context of a general "sustainability crisis". The current crisis, according to the researchers, should not be seen as transient disturbances, but rather understood inter-dependently in its multiple dimensions, such as the economic, social, ecological and political ones. The crisis, usually seen as fragility, can, from the perspective analysed here, potentiate the ability of society to renew its living conditions, which necessarily follows the route of democratisation.

Besides Kurt Lewin's legacy, other traditions such as those of John Dewey and Paulo Freire likewise provide a foundation for participatory research. However, common to all traditions is the dimension of the democratisation of societies, from which, unfortunately, several currents of contemporary Action Research are moving away by watering down this dimension. Democracy is understood, beyond the formal system of elections, as the concrete action of citizens taking part in establishing the regulation of social life in all spheres,

including institutions, work places and everyday life (Gunnarsson & Hansen, 2016). This is, thus, a republican and non-liberal view.

The Scandinavian experience is presented as a contribution to deal with this historical reality of crisis and to a greater acknowledgement of Action Research in current academic society. However, at the same time, as the authors point out, this requires overcoming its internal deficits, such as the conceptualisation of this research methodology, of the meanings of democracy in the relationship with a democratic research in the context of disputes present in the field of Action Research.

This is the horizon of the experiences discussed in two books, the first one published in 2013 (Phillips, Kristiansen, Vehviläinen, & Gunnarson, 2013) and the one that is reviewed here, published in 2016, whose ultimate objective is to reflect on the purpose of research, highlighting its social role and function. For this they emphasise two dimensions: elucidating the new challenges in updating the idea of democracy from the republican perspective; and discerning among the, sometimes contradictory and even conflicting, tendencies of the practice of Action Research in understanding its *raison d'être* and action at the present historical moment, in view of the new requirements to renew natural and societal living conditions.

In this sense the book proposes that the starting point should be the recognition of the deficits of democracy, which have their source both in the insufficient involvement of citizens in the sphere of political culture and in the triumphant march of neoliberalism. Capitalist restructuring in Scandinavia and elsewhere in the world has predominated since the beginning of the 1980s. Even in the countries considered developed, the austerity policies that were justified by referring to the economic crises resulted in totalitarian tendencies that are tremendously dangerous and restrict democratisation to the conditions imposed by the neoliberal logic. There are two possible paths to exit the crisis: the capitalist accumulation that is to be renewed by innovation through technologies and competencies, whose logic includes green capitalism as regards the ecological dimension of the crisis; or radical questioning of the possibility for capitalism to overcome this crisis, whose argument is based on the critique of Karl Polanyi, who considers that the base of the problem is the dichotomy between economy and society.

In the introduction, the editors point out that the practices of Action Research discussed by different authors in two books (one published in 2013, and this in 2016) are engaged in the two perspectives outlined above, including a few hybrid versions. Anyway, and above all, the editors emphasise Action Research for its democratising potential, as they are convinced that it can play an important, although humble role in seeking the answers to help in the reconstruction of truly democratic societies. Thus, the background question that permeates the text is: To what extent can Action Research be a feasible or false alternative considering the strengthening of a participatory and democratic path in Scandinavian societies? This is because the concept of participation is part of both political-ideological logics pointed out by the authors: the perspective of liberal democracy (centering on the individual) and the republican perspective (centering on the common good.)

We believe that the same question makes sense in the reality of Latin America and the Caribbean regarding Participative Action Research (or Participative Research in Brazil). In other words, common characteristics of participatory research can be identified. And, as in Scandinavia, also in other parts of the world a tendency to hybridisation is perceived between Collaborative Research, Interactive Research, Emancipatory Research, Critical Action Research and Critical Utopian Action Research, Participative Research and Participatory Action Research (these typical in Brazil and Latin America), among others.

The book *Action Research for Democracy*, after this substantial introduction, comprises two parts: the first with eight and the second with four chapters, without concern for a pre-established order. Because of the limited space we have here, we will emphasise some of them, although all are significant and have added important elements to our understanding of the theorised practice of Action Research.

The first part focuses, in general, on Action Research experiences in the field of the renewal of professional life and institutional welfare through democratisation with innovative policies, based on research done in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. In the context of the crisis and, in many cases, of the dismantling of the Social Welfare State, there is a movement to value the subjects' everyday life, where employees and citizens are not seen as simple

objects or passive beings. From this perspective, on the contrary, the subjects are participants in the processes of change, taking responsibility for building their own lives, with democratisation and participation going hand in hand.

Although the chapters discuss research with different subjects, foci and levels of discussion, all of them contain rich empirical material and deal with topics such as learning, construction of knowledge and theories, methods and methodologies. The careful and lucid description of the creative character of the process of construction of knowledge should be highlighted, taking into account the forms and pre-conditions of Action Research.

In order to avoid an erroneous relationship between research practice and the foundations of Action Research, the book's main orientation was based on the democratic horizon whose contributions are expressed in the studies that appear in the first part of it. This, however, is done without denying the different views around concepts in dispute, be it in the aspect of innovation as a specific social strategy or in the character and quality of democracy and participation. In this sense, the concepts of work and quality of life, likewise, belong to the core of action-research, together with the aforementioned democratic horizon.

The first chapters of this part of the book deal with work and its relationship to the production of life, emphasising that Action- Research, in its different modalities, has contributed to a more democratic professional life, besides the joint learning processes between researchers, workers and other people involved. In other chapters, likewise, issues involving work and the labour market appear, but with different foci. They analyse the situation of groups of vulnerable people who, due to the risk of exclusion from the labor market, struggle to be reintegrated. Here is a dramatic problem in the recent years of crisis, i.e. unemployment, which, from the neoliberal standpoint, has been treated as employability. As the welfare state is being dismantled, what has been left for these vulnerable workers is work fronts created by workfare programmes.

The last chapters of the first part report on research on welfare institutions. Their approach is inspired by Critical Utopian Action Research, which gives professionals the opportunity of collectively discussing and developing

their actual work practices without having to submit them to standards predefined by the official systems of accountability.

In general, the articles in the first section provide theoretical and methodological aspects permeated by issues of research practice, regarding the relationship between research and teaching, considering the interactive relations between researchers and teachers or social educators. Due to our interest involving the understanding of research as an educational process for participants and researchers, we emphasise the first chapter, *Interactive Research. A Joint Learning Process with the Unions*, by Maria Bennich, Lennart Svensson and Göran Brulin.

We see significant contributions in it, besides identifying ourselves with various challenges faced in this kind of research on social practices in Brazil. Among them we can highlight the experiences of collective work in the solidarity economy, social movements and organisations aimed at popular participation. Participative Research has found similar issues in the work done by non-governmental organisations (social institutions) in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The authors' starting point is the context of the decreasing adherence of workers to labour unions, which at the same time are weakened when dealing with well-organised employers supported by liberal governments. The authors' goal in using Interactive Research is to promote a joint learning process with the participants, in this case the workers affiliated to the unions, in order to achieve a more democratic working environment.

Action Research has been practiced since the 1960s in Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark and Norway) inside and outside universities. Interactive Research has been developing robustly in Sweden for the last ten years, with the involvement of a great number of researchers. Its focus lies in the characteristic of the research that intervenes in action, aiming to achieve changes and, at the same time, to produce knowledge. According to the Swedish Interactive Research Association (SIRA) ([www.hj.se/encell/sira](http://www.hj.se/encell/sira)), Action Research and Interactive Research emphasise their critical role, relating this perspective also to the critical tradition in African and Latin American countries. "The knowledge that is produced should be of practical relevance, of a

high scientific standard and have a critical perspective – also on the joint learning process” (p. 28).

The distinction between different modes of research (Mode I, II and III) in the relationship with the helix is enlightening.<sup>1</sup>

Mode I is configured by a discipline of traditional academic research focused on universal theories and abstract concepts, where researchers decide and promote unilaterally what they are going to research without any interference by the participants.

Mode II is characterised by usefulness to the participants and by interactive and open relations between the participants and the researchers. The approach is multidisciplinary, centred on understanding the context. It emphasises methodological strictness to create a more “robust” form of knowledge, in a simultaneous process of learning and change.

Mode III seeks to combine the theoretical and practical approach, articulating the scientific and social role of research, where researchers and participants carry out a process of collaboration between university actors and external actors, and where the discoveries or results and applying the research occur simultaneously. It proposes to combine traditional scientific values with an innovative ambition, which requires flexibility, closeness and mutual relationships with the participants. However, it is not an eclectic unification, but the development of a new mode of research.

Based on the practice of research Mode III, the authors of this article perform a critical evaluation, presenting dilemmas and difficulties, highlighting the limits that union representatives face in their participation under equal conditions in the Triple Helix process. They conclude that the combination of Interactive Research and Action Research has been an important mediation to include groups in joint learning processes and can thus contribute to reaching a greater democracy in the work environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Helix is based on an interactive approach and on a model of partnership for cooperation. The Triple Helix is organised regionally as a research partnership bringing together the university institution, businesses, public sector organisations and organisations of the labour market. This interaction has been acknowledged as the best way to innovate with sustainability by combining academic excellence with practical impact.

In brief, the chapters that follow in the first part of the book indicate various possibilities of working with Action Research in different areas of knowledge or professional fields such as design, innovation policy and theory, labour market, democratic welfare in day care centers, educational work of teachers, and others.

In the second part of the book issues related to the democratic quality of research are discussed, performing a critical analysis of Mode II and the Triple Helix. Below are some outstanding points of the chapters.

The first text of the second section is titled *Can Action Research Strengthen Democratic Dimensions in Gender Mainstreaming Processes?* The author, Ewa Gunnarsson, studies gender, technology and organisation. In her text she explores a case study in a large Swedish innovation system organized as a Triple Helix model and a Mode II scientific approach. She highlights a few similarities and differences between Action Research and Feminist Research, relating the two approaches that aim to strengthen democratic and liberating ambitions, above all those most aware of the importance of gender mainstreaming. In this regard, the author argues that the dimensions of gender and equality can strengthen and expand democratic empowering and the liberating ambitions of Action Research.

The final part of the chapter examines the challenges for Action Research in large Triple Helix systems. It discusses the concept of “robustness in science”, which has been one of the aspirations of Mode III, and that of “governance”. Due to the focus developed in it, this chapter gives a major contribution to the integration of the issue of gender in strengthening Action Research.

Another relevant discussion is presented by Jonas Egmo under the title *Organising Research Institutions Through Action Research*. This is done in the light of the experience of the author, who focuses on research on how the democratisation of knowledge can promote sustainable ways of life. In it he analyses the findings of three years of Action Research in local communities that can influence future studies on sustainability. He points to the need to discuss the relationship between sustainability and the role of science, not only scientifically, but within the sphere of political issues relevant to the democratisation of societies. Based on his notes, he proposes Critical Utopian

Action Research as a methodological and conceptual framework to address the key question: How do we want to live? This is a democratic question that goes beyond the answers that can be given by science, providing new orientations for future knowledge. Therefore Critical Utopian Action Research is presented as an alternative to the Mode II model.

The last two chapters of the second section present the social dimension of Action Research as something inherent to its philosophical character and creative potential. In his text Erik Lindhult claims that both Action Research and Interactive Research have the intention to bring practitioners into the processes of scientific research. He analyses implicit and explicit aspects of the democratic tendencies and aspirations of these approaches.

In the last chapter, Nielsen and Nielsen explore the invisible creative force in the participatory practices of Action Research and relate it with Critical Utopian Action Research. They discuss authors such as Adorno, Dewey and Freire in order to work with the notion of experience interpreted by the authors in relation to Marx's concept of artistic sense.

Reflecting on the very rich content of the research presented in this book, we underscore its relevance for an international dialogue. From Latin America and the Caribbean we mention the gradual development of Participatory Action Research (PAR)<sup>2</sup> or Participative Research, which began in the 1970s (Gabarrón & Landa, 2006) and was articulated with Popular Education. As an alternative to the positivist model, research practices are introduced that open the way for "learning by transforming", with three characteristics that provide the foundation for the epistemic identity of participative research in this context: transforming action, production of knowledge and participation of the research subjects in the entire process. Carlos Rodrigues Brandão (2006) acknowledges that the Latin American tradition has its roots in the pioneering experience of Orlando Fals Borda and Paulo Freire, and is closely connected to the social and political contexts of the 1970s and 80s. This context bears the mark of the historical relationship "with the popular social movements

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<sup>2</sup> Participatory Action Research became known as a Latin-American form of research through Orlando Fals Borda. In Brazil the most used expressions are Participative Research and Action Research.



and with their projects for emancipatory social transformation” (Brandão, 2006, p. 21).

The Symposium of Cartagena (Colombia) on Critique and Politics in Social Sciences, in 1977, became a historical landmark in which a worldwide network of Participatory Action Research was launched. This was followed by several international events involving Action Research on all continents. The International Symposiums of Action Research/Participative Research in Porto Alegre (Brazil, 2011), Copenhagen (Denmark, 2013) and Bogotá (Colombia, 2015)<sup>3</sup> are part of the renewed and expansion of the dialogue. And the experiences systematised in this book contribute to qualifying participatory research in the academic milieu and bringing closer researchers and local and regional networks from different parts of the world.

Finally, we express our pleasant surprise at the fact that we identified less differences and more similarities in the search for an academically, socially, ethically and politically committed research. Among the common challenges and goals, we can emphasise the search for methodological rigour, the critical, ethical and political perspective linked to the rise in quality of the scientific standard, the involvement of participants in the entire process articulating the educational dimension, besides the benefit to the subjects, among others. Achieving more democratic societies also with the contribution of research, taking each context into account, certainly becomes a promising point of dialogue that goes beyond geographic boundaries.

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<sup>3</sup> The coming 4th International Symposium of Action Research/Participative Research/Participatory Action Research is to take place in Germany in 2017.

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