Book Review

James Karlsen & Miren Larrea (2014).
Territorial development and action research:
Innovation through dialogue
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Reviewed by Ken Dovey

This exquisitely written book explores the possibilities that action research offers those who desire to engage a broad stakeholder base in the complex task of social and economic development within any particular geo-political territory. While the cases explored are taken primarily from the Basque Country in Spain, the writers exhibit global frames of reference that enable the reader to identify with the complex political realities articulated through these cases. This is not a traditional 'academic' book – the authors are deeply concerned and committed citizens first and foremost – and what is particularly striking about the writing is its humble tone, and the authenticity of explication of the rich experiences that have generated the profound forms of knowing (defined in the book as knowledge that manifests in practice) that are made explicit in the text. The authors' intellectual humility and openness to learning-through-action is evident throughout this book, and these attributes highlight their espoused position that making oneself vulnerable in order to learn what really matters, is the most important practice in socio-political development projects. In this respect their message echoes the comment by Kofman and Senge (1993, pp. 19-20) that:

(t)he learning required … is transformational learning. Such learning is not ultimately about tools and techniques. It is about who we are … (and) … only with support, insight, and fellowship of a community can we face the dangers of learning meaningful things

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In particular, the authors argue, it is through democratic dialogue and the servant leadership practices that underpin the generation and leveraging of social capital (and, in particular, the essential resource of trust), that relevant collective knowing can be achieved. Insightfully, the authors incorporate the revolutionary pedagogy of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, into the action research process by signalling the need to 'demystify' reified social realities – social realities experienced by most stakeholders as inevitable – as a precursor to the emancipatory learning that becomes possible within communities once a critical consciousness has been developed.

The book offers no recipe solutions and no stock of knowledge that can be relied on in the difficult endeavour of socio-economic development of a territory. Its fundamental message is that within a dynamic social reality, there is no alternative route to pertinent knowing than that through the praxis embedded in action research. The authors argue convincingly that the dialectical relationship between theoretically-informed-action and action-informed-knowing (which then can be 'translated', or made explicit, into action-informed-theory) is manifested in a complex, continuous and highly political process that requires time and deeply engaged participant-stakeholders for its effective realisation. To sustain that process, the enablement of appropriate learning by all through collective- and self-reflexive practices, needs to become a broadly-endorsed shared practice.

Although the book raises the phenomenon of power as being central to the enactment of all social processes and relationships, the authors stop short of exploring the implications for their practice of this phenomenon. One possible reason for this – one which they hint at in their analysis of their professional location within a university context – is that of the opposition to alternative research methodologies within the academy and mainstream research communities. As a consequence, they fail to locate action research in a constructionist research paradigm. This is the only weakness in an otherwise superb contribution to this complex field of enquiry. If this had been done, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions held by researchers who locate their work in this paradigm, made explicit, greater insight into many of the issues raised by the authors but not effectively explicated, would have become attainable. This blind spot also leads to some contradictions in

the authors' position. For example, as is common practice in territorial development research communities, the authors locate themselves within the Regional Innovation Systems (RIS) framework (a framework that, they lament, is silent on issues of 'power', 'conflict' and 'social innovation', and which advocates value-neutrality and acontextual knowledge 'solutions'). This framework is a product of research located within the positivist paradigm: a research paradigm underpinned by ontological and epistemological assumptions that are radically contrary to those that underpin the constructionist research paradigm. Constructionist research – with action research being an exemplar methodology within this paradigm – recognises the political nature of social realities and that their construction involves contestation of interests, values and ideological positions. Research in the constructionist paradigm assumes that political order (or disorder) within a social reality is a function of the power dynamics prevailing at any particular time within a territory, as well as the historical impact of strategies of mystification, such as the reification of a particular political order and the subsequent hegemony enjoyed by the powerful sectarian interests that benefit from that order. Via the work of Paulo Freire, assumptions such as these lead the authors to argue for the need to make such constructed realities problematic and, in the process, 'unveil' them. Furthermore, it is these assumptions that underpin one of the key insights conveyed by the book, namely that for technical innovation to occur, the power relations within a territory have to be transformed appropriately.

This is a book that contributes a rare form of wisdom to the debate on territorial development. Its authors are both field-experienced researchers and open-minded practitioners; each of whom has committed her/his professional life to making a positive difference in the lives of cherished communities.

Reference

Kofman, F., & Senge, P. (1993). Communities of commitment: The heart of learning organizations. *Organizational Dynamics,* 22(2), 5-23.

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