

Editorial

All of a sudden, apparently out of nowhere and for reasons that range from the high cost of public transportation to expenditures with soccer stadiums for next year's world cup, protestors have taken to the streets of hundreds of Brazilian cities, large and small, in recent weeks. This is not an isolated phenomenon, as we can see similar movements happening in places as diverse as New York, Barcelona and Cairo. After a time of intellectual perplexity, explanations keep multiplying, and most of them sound plausible and convincing. Maybe the variety of explanations corresponds to the variety of voices that try to make themselves heard in the multitude.

It may be no mere coincidence that the *International Journal of Action Research* dedicated the last issue (2013/1) to theme "Participation and Power". The subject is complemented in this issue with new perspectives, visions and empirical studies. This statement from Werner Fricke's article in this issue summarises the argument which seems to underlie the discussion: "Elected representatives at all levels from local to national and international level, in politics as well as in trade unions, are afraid of open participative processes, because results and demands are unforeseeable and a threat to those in power. They do not realise nor accept that democratic participation might one day become the only way to re-establish acceptable, legitimate democracy." This holds even more true for unelected managers in public offices and organisations.

The present issue opens with one of the last lectures by *Orlando Fals Borda*, in 2007, at a Latin American Studies Association (LASA) conference in Montreal. Participatory Action Research, as he tells us, had a diabolic midwife in Colombia: violence. Paradoxically, it is the place in Latin America where we had the most prominent experiences of popular participation in social research. But it was not one man's lonely work, nor the prerogative of

one discipline. In Fals Borda's understanding, Participatory Action Research itself represents an opportunity for convergence, as when he refers to the meeting of Action Researchers from around the world in Cartagena (Colombia). This lecture, now translated from Spanish to English with the permission of LASA, is a landmark for Action Research, as much in terms of memory of its origins and development in Latin America, as in terms of perspectives for the future.

Both articles that follow are in some way linked to Fals Borda's lecture. *Werner Fricke* relates his concept of "democratic participation" to Fals Borda's concept of "authentic participation". In Fricke's view, participation has become a buzzword in many economic and social contexts. Recent developments in the workplace are usually not capable of making more than false promises for participation. The author brings as examples "crowd sourcing" where workers are recruited worldwide to develop very specific projects and deliver small work packages, and a new emergent business called participation of consumers in designing, creating (new) products (so called co-producers or prosumers). The author reserves special attention for participation in trade unions, reminding us that democratic participation is part of their history, while acknowledging the difficulties posed not only by changes in the production process and in the workplace, but also by union leaders who do not promote authentic participation for fear of losing power. The article ends with a strong plea for democratic participation in a social situation that, according to the author, is more in need of it than ever before

Danilo Streck's article deals with some dimensions of participation in social research, such as the meanings attributed to participation, the reasons for defending and promoting participation in research, the conditions for participation and some strategies. The argument is that in spite of the mainstream tendencies which do not prioritise participation in research, there may be no possible shortcut to the deep social changes needed today. It may look like Don Quijote's (a metaphor used by Fals Borda) battle against the windmills. The other metaphor in the subtitle, borrowed from Peter Reason, points to the utopia which seems to be worth producing: a participatory worldview. It is the author's assumption that taking participation seriously challenges us to reposition ourselves as researchers in relation to the people with whom we

carry out our work. It also challenges us to rethink the role of academic institutions and research centres in producing socially relevant knowledge. This is the inescapable political dimension of participation.

Peter Cressey, Peter Totterdill, and Rosemary Exton draw a conceptual framework for workplace social dialogue, not only distinguishing between training, organisational learning, and productive reflection as a special form of workplace dialogue, but also differentiating among levels of dialogue quality and knowledge sharing. The authors suggest, based on empirical data, that representative participation alone has little impact on either performance or on quality of working life, unless it also shapes participative working practices throughout the organisation. Informal, spontaneous and much less tangible practices, which are harder to capture, measure or describe, play a critical role, alongside formal structures. Hence, the authors call for cases that point forward, and give clues as to the forms of participative regimes that are emerging to deal with contemporary complexity.

The empirical insights provided by *Marcos Bidart Carneiro de Novaes and Janette Brunstein*, looking into the development of competencies managers need to cope with paradoxes and challenges related to climate change and sustainability issues, are especially relevant if we consider the lack of empirical studies that try to understand the day-to-day challenges and the mental concepts of managers. The study was developed by researchers in partnership with hotel managers in Brazil. Opening the organisation's "black box" meant dealing with tensions which had been suppressed until then: "We saw the exhaustion caused by the contradiction between: unbridled consumption, boundless financial ambition and a narrow operational focus to meet these requirements on the one hand; and on the other hand, the notion that daily decisions are exactly what can destroy the possibilities for harmony in a sustainable future." But at the same time: "Based on new understandings, the managers set new actions in motion, such as seeking alliances with recyclable waste pickers and other more democratic ways of living with their employees, and they began to yearn to influence strategic decisions about sustainability."

Back to the opening paragraph of the editorial: among the voices of people in the streets one may also be able to identify some of them directed to us

as researchers, and to the way we carry out our work. Participation may not be a panacea for facing the complexity of social issues that humanity is facing today, but as the articles in this issue of the *International Journal of Action Research* suggest, productive changes will probably not come through without authentic/democratic participation.

Danilo R. Streck

Editor-in-chief