New Challenges For Action Research[1]

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Abstract

From the perspective of sociology of work, the article"New Challenges for Action Research" raises the question: How can dependent employees in heteronomous employment relationships fulfill their elementary need for self-determination, if the progressive economisation of the working and living world shapes their consciousness and even their identities? If utilitarian calculi supersede empathy and solidarity everywhere, and everyone is called upon to become a successful manager of himself under the pressure of so-called "self-optimisation" (Subjectification trap)?

Research in sociology of work and experiments in action research show how dependent workers can escape from the subjectification trap by engaging in processes of collective reflection, and so re-activate their capacity for active and democratic participation, and for self-determined designing their working conditions to regain the ability to act and the power to independently shape their working conditions. Finally, it is asked if and how this process is possible under conditions of digital work in platform economics.

Key words: Action research; democratic participation; subjectification; platform society

Nuevos Desafíos Para La Investigación-Acción

Resumen

Desde la perspectiva de la sociología del trabajo, el artículo "Nuevos Desafíos para la Investigación-Acción" plantea la pregunta: ¿Cómo pueden los empleados dependientes en relaciones de trabajo heterónomas satisfacer su necesidad elemental de autodeterminación, si la progresiva economización del mundo del trabajo y mundo de vida moldea su conciencia e incluso sus identidades? ¿Si los cálculos utilitaristas substituyen la empatía y la solidaridad en todas partes, y todos están llamados a convertirse en un exitoso administrador de sí mismo bajo la presión de la llamada "auto-optimización" (trampa de la Subjetivación)?

Investigación en sociología del trabajo y experimentos en investigación-acción muestra cómo los trabajadores dependientes pueden escapar de la trampa de la subjetivación al involucrarse en procesos de reflexión colectiva, y así reactivar su capacidad para la participación activa y democrática y para el

diseño autodeterminado de sus condiciones de trabajo para recuperar la capacidad de actuar y el poder de configurar independientemente sus condiciones de trabajo. Finalmente, se pregunta si y cómo este proceso es posible en condiciones de trabajo digital en la economía de plataforma.

Palabras Clave: Investigación-acción; participación democrática; subjetivación; sociedad de plataforma.

1.   Posing the problem

How can dependent workers recognise their interests when the progressive economisation of the work and life – world and the so-called subjectification of labor (Moldaschl and Voss 2002) shape their consciousness, their identities? Cost-benefit calculations everywhere take the place of empathy and solidarity. Everyone is called upon to become a successful manager of themselves under the pressure of "self-optimisation". The result is widespread fatigue in the face of a plethora of supposedly unlimited opportunities (Ehrenberg 2015). Therefore, at stake in this investigation are the difficulties encountered by attempts to realise democratic participation in today's economy and society.

Democratic participation in the workplace depends on the commitment and activity of many stakeholders. Their motivation is the interest in participation and self-determination inherent in every human being as an anthropological constant (Fricke 1975, 2004, 2009). However, as our empirical work has often shown, the need for democratic participation and self-determination is often suppressed: in Fordist work situations due to high workloads of physical and emotional nature, through domination and control in the work process, through Taylorist forms of division of labor (Fricke et al.), in post-Fordist forms of work through the subjectification of work (subjectification understood in the sense of Foucault as the conditioning of the subject by social, as well as economic norms). This subjectification is at the heart of a currently successful rationalisation strategy of capital; its success stems from the fact that the management of companies succeeds in using the subjective skills of the employees to an unprecedented extent for the efficient organisation of their work. Employees are given limited freedom to design co-operation and work processes that give them the illusion of working independently. I speak of an illusion of self-determination, because the participation granted by management is limited to executing work, whereas the participation in the design of their working conditions (financial and human resources, time budgets, type of product) is excluded.

After a brief examination of some of the positions of current sociology of work on the thesis of the subjectification of work (Section 2), I will present the concept and my empirical experiences with action research based on Kurt Lewin (Lewin 1951), which aims at the activation of dependent workers (Section 3). Action research is suitable as a theoretically and practically founded concept to release dependent workers from the subjectification trap, inasmuch it develops and promotes their ability to act and their self-determination in processes of collective reflection and subsequent actions. In addition, it will be concerned with the concepts of autonomy and self-determination of the workers. I do not share a naive concept of individual autonomy. The subject is the ensemble of social conditions (Verhältnisse, nicht Beziehungen (relationships) (Marx) and therefore not autonomous as an individual.

But despite being socially shaped, the subject is capable and interested in dealing actively and consciously with social influences (norms, social background) in order to shape his/her identity as far as possible in self-determination and resistance to conditioning (alienation) through social norms and economic interests (Parin 1983; Foucault 1994; Eribon 2016).

2.   The subjectification trap

I start with some remarks on the centrality of work for the subject.

There is increasing information from companies, psychiatric clinics and relevant literature that depressive disorders among workers are massively increasing (Déjours 2008). The psychologist Alain Ehrenberg explains that the modern subject of the twenty-first century becomes depressed as result of the effort to become self-actualised in the face of unlimited possibilities of self-realisation (becoming her/himself) and of the pressure to constantly self-optimise; the subject loses his/her ability to act.

Action research can initiate a healing process for these employees. It can become a counterbalance to today's widespread depression illness. Above all because, as a dialogical procedure, it enables employees to collective self-reflection and to act in processes of democratic participation. From a task of the individual self-determination it becomes the accomplishment of collective action. While autonomy in the first half of the twentieth century was still a possibility (Parin) attainable for the development of the individual subject, self – determination of subjects today is attainable and stable only within the framework of collective solidary action by groups. Individual employees acquire the ability to self-determination only in joint democratisation and reflection processes. And they preserve, even more: in the co-operative process they practice and increase their ability to act, their self-consciousness, their innovative qualifications, their ability to work. By exploring the possibilities of alternative work design together and realising it together, they no longer stand as individuals resigned to a wealth of unattainable possibilities; it is no longer about individual self-realisation, but forms of solidarity work design: through them then also to self-determination and strengthening of the subject.

One recognises the importance of co-operation and solidarity for successful self-determined work design, if one remembers that work is a social relationship that is characterised by a special relationship of subjectivity and work (Déjours 2006): Through work, the sensitivity of the subject develops, it changes and evolves. The result is a "bodily intelligence" that the Greeks called *metis* (cunning intelligence at Déjours 2006, p. 52, probably to be understood as *Geschick* in German).

Furthermore, Déjours addresses the subject's situation between individual experience and collective action. Work as a social relationship "... takes place in a human world characterised by relationships of inequality, power and domination. Working means involving one's subjectivity in a world that is hierarchical, ordered, constrained, and rife with struggles for domination. Thus, the reality of work is not simply that of the task ... Working is also experiencing the resistance of the social world, and more precisely that of social relations, to the development of intelligence and subjectivity. The reality of work is not only the reality of the objective world but also that of the social world" (Idem, p. 56).

The co-operation of workers, especially when they deviate from standard requirements and develop their own more productive ways of co-ordinating their work, is the result of discussions between them, which are not only about technical considerations, but also about preferences, taste, age, gender, health and medical history, in short: values (Idem, p. 57). These are processes of collective reflection (Eikeland 2007) and reflexive work (Langemeyer 2015; Fricke 2014). At this point, Déjour's reflections come very close to a central theme of work-related action research: promoting processes of collective reflection and democratic participation in the organisation of work (see Section 3).

Déjour's conclusion: "... work rules always have a double orientation – that of the efficiency and quality of work on the one hand, and a social objective on the other. Co-operation presumes a *de facto* compromise that is always both technical and social. This is so because working is never just producing; it is also, and always, living together (in the Aristotelian sense of the term)" (Déjours, 2006, p. 58). And elsewhere: "Work offers what is perhaps the most ordinary opportunity to learn about living together" (in Aristotle's sense) and democracy. But it can also give rise to the worst – the instrumentalisation of human beings and barbary" (Idem, p. 46, italics WF)[2]. Dejour's conclusion is: "At the core of these processes, the relationship to work seems irreplaceably decisive. But the relationship to work only offers this possibility if what emerges from subjectivity in work is recognised and respected. Contemporary changes in the forms of work organisation, administration, and management, in the wake of the neo-liberal turn, rely on principles that precisely suggest sacrificing subjectivity in the name of profitability and competitiveness" (Idem, p. 60).

Déjours opens the view on the ambivalent effect of work on the subject: as a social relationship, work promotes processes of subjectivation[3]. However, in its current neoliberal form (heteronomy of a domineering work organization, instrumentalisation of participation, interest and apparent autonomy in the context of indirect control in the service of efficiency and competitiveness) work causes subject subjugation, subjectification in the sense of Foucault. Not Déjour, but some German sociologists of work see both forms, becoming a subject and submission of the subject to the conditions of labor, as the results of the *same* process. Bröckling, for example, thinks that the creation and submission of the subject, his "social conditioning and self-constitution, go hand in hand" (Bröckling, 2002, p. 177).

Ines Langemeyer drew attention to this short-circuit, "that the *subject subjugation*, as a domineering conditioning and productive utilisation of subjectivity is short-circuited with becoming subject in the sense of developing a capacity for thought and action" (Langemeyer 2002, p. 364). She criticises Bröckling for hiding "forms of acting capacity and of becoming subject, which can point to the possibility of power-free relationships" (ibid). The present text is about this capacity for action and the need of the subjects to liberate themselves from domination, and to work and live as self-determined as possible. We have summarised the acting capacity and the need for self-determination in terms of innovative qualifications (Fricke 2009); in what follows, I would like to show how action research can

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2   *Súzen sunérgia* (living together) is always working together at Aristotle. Citizens must co-operate in the accomplishment of tasks: that makes them, for Aristotle, political people, citizens.

3   I distinguish between subjectivation (as fully developing one's subjectivity or becoming an agent of one's subjectivity in the sense e.g. Rancière is using it) and subjectification in the Foucauldian connotation

foster the development and application of these innovative qualifications, albeit initially limited by heteronomy and domination of current neoliberal capitalism in work and social life.

If one attempts to develop forms of self-determined work under the conditions of heteronomous work in neoliberal capitalist enterprises, as is the goal of action research , then one must become clear about when, as we have done in our research, we may at least be able to speak of democratic participation, and when not. We did our best not to set the scale too low for that.

The increased and growing importance of the subjectivity of workers, or more precisely of their subjective qualifications such as creativity, content engagement, empathy, solidarity, etc., for coping with modern work processes is undisputed in the literature of sociology of work. Undisputed are also the interests of companies and their ability to exploit subjectivity for the purpose of increasing the efficiency of their work. On the other hand, it is controversial whether capital pays or is willing to pay the employees the price for using their subjectivity by recognising the claim of workers to self-determination in the work process and accepting its realisation, at least in the form of democratic participation.

Based on our research experience (Fricke et al. 1981; Fricke 2009), I conclude that companies and enterprises allow forms of participation, but as a rule this is an instrumentalisation of participation: companies grant opportunities for limited self-organisation in work processes (Pongratz and Voß, 1997, speak of heteronomous (fremdbestimmte) self-organisation, but this is neither democratic participation nor a form of self-determination: the participation in decisions on the framework conditions of work (human and financial resources, time budget, product) is regularly excluded, while the output and efficiency control via a system of indicators continues. Nevertheless, the workers engage in these forms of externally determined, limited and controlled self-organisation, because they seem to meet the interests of democracy and participation of dependent workers. However, this interest is not fulfilled by *granted* self-determination, but merely instrumentalised.

The view of instrumentalisation of participation is controversial in the literature. However, it is undeniable that the management of capitalist companies has repeatedly managed to practice reduced forms of participation using the same label. There has been a process of not only capturing experience of democratic participation by the management, but at the same time of its subsequent devaluation and reversal into its opposite. I do not want to go as far as Moldaschl, who speaks of "domination by autonomy" (Moldaschl 2002), but the "new autonomy" granted under indirect control (Nies and Sauer 2012; Sauer 2014) is a significantly reduced autonomy for workers: the possibility of self-determined decisions is limited to work execution and work organisation, while no participation is allowed on decisions about the framework conditions of the production process (product, financial and human resources, time budget). Therefore, I cannot agree with Dieter Sauer when he says that "companies *actually* fulfill the classic demands for more autonomy and independence" (Sauer 2014, p. 12). Harald Wolf is more precise when he does not call all forms of conscious allowing of decision-making that make independent problem-solving in specific areas part of the normal work role as autonomy in the sense of self-determined work. In organisational reality, "the granting of competencies of self-organisation in any case remains entangled with their limitation, with externally set goals, with organisational requirements and constraints" (Wolf 1999, p. 169). Participation offers by management, he says elsewhere (Idem, p. 160) "are used directly as leverage to mobi-

lise 'production intelligence', and sacrifices informal producer knowledge in order to increase efficiency. It is about 'optimisation' and 'rationalisation' in, limited, 'self-direction'". In the dispute between democratic participation and domination in the enterprise, the prescribed self-regulation serves the achievement of organisational goals, to which, besides efficiency and optimization of the production processes, also belongs the attainment of the employees' agreement to the domination by capital: "Self-activity is an essential condition of heteronomous work and the bureaucratic-capitalist organisations' capacity to survive" (Wolf 1999, p. 101).

Burawoy also points out the consequences of self-employment for the workers, which is limited by management and operational requirements. "It becomes the moment of a particularly sophisticated form of manipulation: here it is the management itself that deliberately creates or leaves free spaces, thereby providing a kind of playground with apparent options" (Ibid.). Through management agreement with domination is reproduced. "Workers create their own 'informal' rules and enforce them over the management, as essential for the coordination of production .... Such a minimal realisation of the radical need to control one's own work becomes a fundamental component of the approval of capitalist production" (Burawoy 1983, p. 510).

This view, supported by various authors (Fricke, Wolf, Burawoy), of instrumentalised participation in the form of granting only limited participation and self-organisation rights, which management can otherwise revoke at any time, is empirically justified. Boltanski and Chiapello cite the 1978 report of the Trilateral Commission, an international "mouthpiece of financial organisations and multinational corporations advocating capital internationalisation" (Sklar 1980, p. 73). "In this report the authors comment in favor of more direct forms of participation in the workplace: 'The growing awareness of the ineffectiveness of authoritarian management on the one hand and the limitations of systems of representation (the increasingly weaker unions, WF) on the other has led to the development of what Prof. Trist has called *work-linked democracy*. Essentially, this approach is about replacing authority management with semi-autonomous workgroups that take responsibility for organising the work tasks they have been asked to do. ... The principles of work democracy are easy to implement organisationally ... '" (Roberts, Okamoto, Lodge 1981, p. 231, translation by Boltanski and Chiapello, 2003, p. 241).

An international commission of representatives of financial organisations and multinational corporations therefore recommends the introduction of precise and limited forms of participation (responsibility for the *organization of the tasks assigned to them* in semi-autonomous groups), which is suitable for the instrumentalisation of participation. At the end of the 1970s, the motive and most important goal of the international employers was to regain control of the companies in view of the then widespread demands of the working class for self-determined work. This goal was achieved by "breaking with the previous control methods and endogenising the demands for autonomy and personal responsibility that had hitherto been regarded as subversive" (Idem., p. 244), but with the consequence of a reduction of the original claim of the worker's self-determined action to a fictitious participation, identified as externally organised self-organisation (Pongratz and Voß 1997).

Boltanski and Chiapello continue to report how, during the 1970s, French employers have tried hard to defuse and undermine workers' demands for self-determination and

recognition of their creative abilities in hundreds of work-organisation experiments in French industrial companies. There have been a number of extensive reports from companies on experiments on issues such as improving working conditions, abandonment of inspection facilities, etc.: at a metal plant assembly line work has been abolished in assembling electrical appliances "to give each employee greater autonomy"; Peugeot set up assembly units to "contribute to a flattening of hierarchical structures ... to increase autonomy in the workshops" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2003, p. 245).

These reports are important because they show *how*, in the age of indirect control, management has withheld from workers the fulfillment of their demand for labour autonomy: a problem not otherwise found in empirical sociology of work. The result: Too short-sighted, many a labour and industrial sociological as well as the international management literature equate a carelessly used concept of autonomy with the need of the workers for self-determined work. A similarly inappropriate use of the concept of autonomy can be found in the German research and action programme on the "humanization of working life", after all project approaches to the democratization of work had been removed from the program as of 1981 (Fricke, 2014). Both, the German humanisation program after 1980, as well as the several hundred work organisational experiments of the French companies, testify to the success of the entrepreneurial strategy of emptying participation from their business democratic claim and instrumentalising for indirect control (Nies and Sauer, 2012) or modernisation of the exercise of power.

The demands and expectations of employees in democratic participation do not end with the successful instrumentalisation of their interest in participation. Organizational practices of limited self-organisation and reduced participation in organisational goals lead to disappointment on the part of employees, and it is an important question how they handle it. Studies of work sociology, when pursuing this question, will be confronted with the potential, albeit perhaps buried, of employees that will enable them to act independently, and to participate in a democratic way. We were confronted with this potential in the Peiner humanisation project and called it "innovative qualifications" (Fricke et al 1981; Fricke 1983). Harald Wolf speaks of "germs of autonomy, of self-determined action" (Wolf 1999, p. 174). Given favourable conditions, the capacity for and interest in democratic participation can grow, though not quasi "on its own" but be fostered through social processes, such as through co-operation and dialogue with trade unions and scientists in the context of action research (see Section 3).

It should not be a question in work research to state *whether or not* subjects have an interest and the ability (the potential) for self-determined work and democratic participation. Rather, work sociological research is about initiating, accompanying, and analysing processes that have the potential of fostering workers' democratic action and self-determination. It is therefore necessary to think in processes.

Thinking in processes in terms of work, technique, cooperation; from this follows the consciousness of the historical and therefore designable character of all conditions of organisational work; the understanding of the workers as subjects of organisational processes in all their manifestations (work and technique, work organisation and working conditions, co-operative work) were the starting points for our research, leading us to develop processes of democratic participation, to demonstrate the existence of innovative qualifications as

creative potential, and ultimately to action research as the theoretical and research-practical concept appropriate to our intellectual interest. Our intellectual interest was "to discover starting points for social change in industrial work life" (Fricke 1975, p. 23). For this purpose, there is a need for subjects capable of action who know how to express their interest in self-determination in the world of work despite all the risks posed by neoliberal alienation and instrumentalisation. Action research can support them in collective reflection and action processes.

This ability of action research is all the more important as solidary acting is increasingly difficult today in times of neoliberalism. This applies for conditions forged by organisations, and increasingly digitally networked work, especially if it takes place as individual work without organisational context, mediated via virtual platforms (crowd-working) (Section 3.6). Precarious working conditions, widespread fears about keeping the work place or about the next job are fueling competition between those working as crowd-workers. All this poses great challenges for action research; action research can only meet them because subjects, according to our research experience: all subjects, possess the indestructible potential of innovative qualifications, this means having the capacity for and interest in democratic participation and self-determination (conceptual Fricke 1975, empirical Fricke, et al 1981).

This is true even though, as Ehrenberg has shown, we find ourselves in "a political crisis and a crisis of the subject, in a fundamental change of these two figures, politics and person: transformations that are mutually dependent" (Ehrenberg 2000, p 133). They express themselves in a threat to subjectivity through power and subsequently a *restriction of subjects' ability to act*. "Public action is no longer organised by mass movements, it no longer happens under the protection of an organisation and it no longer happens in the face of an identifiable adversary" (Ibid.). This interpretation of the weakening of the subject and the concomitant limitation of his political and operational ability to act seems to me to be more accurate and realistic than the assumption of the conditioning of the subject, understood as his/her submission to external ends. What disturbs this assumption, and makes it seem unrealistic, is the disregard of the subject's ability to resist the attempts of submission/conditioning. Instead of picturing in all facets the "subjectification of labour", understood as the subjugation of the subject, it would be necessary to investigate empirically and promote by action research, presupposing a normative concept of subjectivity (interest in participation as anthropological constant [Fricke], the generally human need to be free of domination [Rawls]; subject with emancipatory core in Eva Senghaas-Knobloch), possible forms of resistance to the subject's conditioning and usage of subjects for the purpose of exploitation. Foucault in his early writings and in his wake Moldaschl / Voss have apparently overlooked the subject's ability to resist.

From the late Foucault is a short text that supports this idea. In the epilogue to the study of Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow "Michel Foucault – Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics" (1982), Foucault writes: "We need to conceive and build what we could be in order to shake off this kind of political double-bind, which consists in the simultaneous individualisation and totalisation by modern power structures (of the state, global corporations and before that the church, WF) ... . We need to bring about new forms of subjectivity by adopting the kind of individuality rejected for centuries." (Foucault, 1994, p. 250). Summing up: "(T)oday the fight against the forms of subjectification, against the subjuga-

tion of subjectivity[4] becomes increasingly important, even if the struggles against domination and exploitation have not disappeared, quite the contrary."

In the following section I present action research (Idem) as a method to promote the individual and collective capacity of subjects (dependent employees) and to enable them to resist the conditioning for exploitation purposes so that they can actualise their need for self-determination as much as possible. Of course, in this purpose, to promote self-determination and the ability to act, it is necessary to consider the above-mentioned difficulty that Alain Ehrenberg has convincingly worked out (Ehrenberg 2015).

3.   Action research: the road to workers' active and democratic participation

"Action research (AR) refers to the conjunction of three elements: research, action, and participation. Unless all three elements are present, the process cannot be called AR. Put another way, AR is a form of research that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social change and social analysis. But the social change we refer to is not just any kind of change. AR claims to increase the ability of the involved community or organisation members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so" (Greenwood and Levin 1998, p. 6).

Of all the characteristics of action research, the most interesting in terms of science is its special relationship between theory and practice. To this day, the social sciences are discussing "whether and how they intervene in social practice with the means of theory" (Vobruba 2017, p. 173). This is the central question of action research. Secondly, the relationship between scientists and practitioners in the research and design process is equally important and closely linked to the theory-practice problem. It is seen and practiced very differently in the different scientific concepts; the differences range from the hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched (i.e. research objects) over the value-free postulate and the artificial image of researching independently of the observer (the subject) to an equal relationship between actors from science and practice in action research.

3.1   Action research and critical theory

Action research has met with resistance and rejection in German social science for decades. A powerful root of this resistance was for a long time the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer saw the task of critical theory as: "to overcome the tension between the insight of the theorist and the oppressed majority *for which he thinks*" (Horkheimer 1937, p. 274, emphasis WF). The intellectual theorist, as Marcuse put it in 1989, "becomes a kind of a delegated thinker of society" (Marcuse 1989, p. 15, quoted in Vobruba l.c., p. 176).

Leo Löwenthal, a member of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research since 1924, has made a particularly decisive formulation of the relationship between theory and practice

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4   The quoted text states: "Today the fight ... against subjugation *through* subjectivity becomes increasingly important ....". However, this formulation is based on a translation error. I have been made aware of this by Ines Langemeyer (2002, p. 366).

from the point of view of critical theory: "... the reflection of the relationship between theory and practice was its [critical theory's WF] innermost element", he says in a lengthy conversation with Helmut Dubiel, and he continues: "... this awareness of non-participation, of denial; the inexorable analysis of the existing as far as we were competent in each case is the essence of critical theory" (Löwenthal 1980, p. 79/80). On the criticism of a student in one of his seminars, critical theory had "completely disconnected from Marxism and lost sight of reality," Löwenthal would have answered "that he missed with this criticism the meaning of critical theory. *We have not abandoned practice, but practice has left us*" (Idem, p. 79). This sentence refers to the development of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party, but it also marks the great distance of critical theory to social practice in general, its hierarchical view of the theory-practice relationship then and into the recent past. Our slogan was "do not participate", says Leo Löwenthal elsewhere in the cited interview, "we were different and we knew better" (Löwenthal 1980, p. 75).

For Habermas too, theory and practice are two separate discourses. He denies any possibility of connecting them in any way and sees only a mediated influence of theory on practical changes: The critical theory can stimulate a process of enlightenment that brings about a change of practice "by educating the practitioners [*Praxisakteure*]". A direct involvement of the researcher in practical discourses is not recommended. According to Habermas, it can integrate the scientist so much into the process of change that he loses his ability to participate in theoretical discourses[5]. He resolutely and without further justification rejects action research: "The fashionable demands for a type of action research, which is to connect with political enlightenment overlook the also applicable to the social sciences circumstance that an uncontrolled change of the field with the simultaneous collection of data in the field is incompatible" (Habermas 1963, p. 18).

Habermas here draws the relationship between theory and practice as a one-way street; he overlooks the fact that in action research, participating in practical discourses for the researcher also means a learning process that can revert to theoretical discourse. Secondly, the argument against the "uncontrolled change of the field" is interesting: It comes from the natural sciences, in which the controlled change of the object under investigation belongs to the methodical canon of scientific experiments. In addition, one can read the wording in such a way that Habermas in action research misses the theory-controlled change of the field, this means also that he supposes the traditional superposition of theory over practice. With both readings, Habermas misses the understanding of action research.

More recently, a new development has emerged within the framework of critical theory, suggesting a growing understanding of action research. From the postulate of an epistemic rupture between the practice of "people" and that of scientists (Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas) to the gradual acknowledgment of reflexive abilities even of practitioners, critical theory has now come a long way. Recently recognised is the ability of practitioners to independently criticise the social conditions in which they live (Celikates 2009).

In the context of his reflections on the reflexive abilities of the practitioners, Celikates shows by examples that the abilities of the practitioners to "reflexively refer to the social conditions and their effects on themselves" can be hindered or blocked by certain social conditions; in other words, these abilities exist, even if they are hindered by blockages in

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5   Concerning the position of action research see section 3.2.

their application, so that on the part of the actors "structural reflexivity deficits" become noticeable (Celikates 2009, p.174). Their overcoming can be done "not just by an impulse from the outside – by an external enlightening authority – ..., but .... ultimately can only be credited to those affected themselves" (op. cit., p. 179). Celikates implies, with these expressions, which I find remarkable, the possibility of actionable subjects with the capacity for collective reflection.

Both the recognition of the equivalence[6] of practitioners and scientific actors in the research process, and the departure from the postulate of epistemic rupture between the practices of each are prerequisites for answering the question, "whether and how to intervene with the means of theory in social practice" (Vobruba 2017, p. 173), a prerequisite for understanding the solution that identifies action research in this field.

3.2   Theory and Practice in Action Research

Vobruba sees theory as a social practice of its own kind. "If theory is considered sociologically, there is no categorial difference between theory and practice, but *two forms of practice,* namely the practice of people and the practice of those people that carry out sociological theorising and research ... It is no longer about the relation of theory and practice, but about *the conditions of possibility for coupling these two different practices*" (Vobruba 2017, p. 179, emphasis WF).

The understanding of theoretical discourse (theory) as a practice of (social) scientists can already be found in 2007 at the Norwegian action researcher Eikeland (Eikeland 2007). It is a common view in action research, and the question of the possibilities of "coupling these two different practices", which Vobruba postulates, but does not elaborate, finds its solution in action research.

For action researchers, the possibility of intervention in social practice with the means of theory is taken for granted, it is one of their core tasks: theoreticians of action research have been dealing with this question for a long time. Kurt Lewin: "For social concerns, it is not enough for university institutions to produce a new scientific insight. It will be necessary to create fact-finding organs, social eyes and ears, directly in the institutions (in the original: corporations") of social practice (Lewin 1951, first 1946, p. 285, translation slightly updated, WF), "Research should have the power to change the world, to intervene into social practice and thereby regain new theoretical problems" (Langemeyer 2011, p. 153).

The intervention of theory in social practice takes the form of dialogues as a form of collective reflection between scientists and practitioners. Thus, in the process of action research, the "coupling" of the two types of practice turns into a dialogical co-operation of science and practice with the twofold goal of (a) gaining new scientific knowledge and (b) shaping social practice according to criteria set in the dialogue of the participating actors from science and practice. The meaning of the co-operation of science and practice for the scientists consists in gaining new scientific knowledge from the process of designing social practice (Lewin called for the "development of more conclusive theories of social change",

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6   Not their equality; of course there are differences, e.g. in the temporal rhythm of scientific and practical work, in the nature of work experience, work organisation, etc. But there are also common features (often overlooked or disputed), such as the capacity for reflection and self-reflection, the capacity for discourse, etc.

Lewin 1951, p. 287), for the practitioners correspondingly new practical knowledge from a changed practice.

This determination of the relation of theory and practice as a unity of learning, action and research (Idem, p. 291), of knowledge and change of social practice is constitutive for all definitions of action research. Here, collective reflection of practitioners and action researchers plays a central role, generating capacity for action and change processes. In a process of reflection of practice, scientific and practical knowledge is developed: "By (1) mirroring both the present and the past (practice), participants can thus (2) question the current ways of thinking, carry out (3) thought experiments concerning possible changes .... as well as planning practical experiments and evaluating them" (Eikeland and Nicolini 2011, p. 172).

Exactly according to this concept of change laboratories originated from activity theory (Virkkunen and Ahone, 2011; Clot 2009), but without knowing it then, we have built up in our Peiner Project for the Humanisation of Work Life 1975-1979 the process of development, agreement and evaluation of alternative working practices together with the practitioners (so-called "unskilled" workers). In other words, we have developed our research concept according to our question from the situation that we found at the beginning of our project: starting with an analysis from the point of view of the employees, and subsequently a participatory, dialogical – reflexive learning and action process including the development of a theoretical concept from practice[7]. "Within such a context ... theorising is constructed as internal, not external, to the practice at hand" (Eikeland and Nicolini 2011, p. 172).

Although the scope and duration of our approach was greater, its logic was that of the change lab: At the beginning of the project, we asked each worker at work three questions: (1) Please describe your working practice ("Mirroring both practices of the present and the past") (2) What do you have to criticise ("question the current way of thinking and practice") and (3) What would you change? ("Carry out thought experiments concerning possible changes").

This first phase of the reflection of current and possible alternative work practice (analysis of possibilities: E. and W. Fricke 1977, p. 104; Fricke 2010, p. 259) initially included three weeks in the organisation plus a one-week seminar with all 45 members of the cutting department (Anschneiderei) in an educational institution. In the course of the entire four-year humanisation project, four further weekly seminars took place outside the company, which served as an accompanying reflection and evaluation of the company changes as well as further training of the participating workers (Fricke et al. 1981). According to our experience, this high proportion of reflection and further education is an essential prerequisite for successful action research if it wants to liberate practitioners from the subjectification trap and develop actors capable of action who are able to change their working conditions according to their interests and carry out a process of democratic participation. Due to an agreement between top management and the local works council no participating worker was fired during or after the action research project. In addition their wage was, though modestly, raised acknowledging their innovative suggestions; moreover the wage system was changed from piece rate to wage per hour, which was an essential demand of the workers. For more details see Fricke et al. 1981; Fricke 1983)

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7   I have briefly outlined our empirical approach in order to show how a theoretical concept can be developed from practice with the participation of the practitioners and with close attention to the initial situation.

3.3   Action Research is about Values

Action research is not a value-free social science. It is, and this also belongs to its core, committed to democracy. From the beginning, action researchers were dedicated to democratic values. Kurt Lewin always emphasszed the need for a value orientation for the social sciences in general, and for action research in particular. There are two aspects of action research: a process for changing social practice; and the effort to gain new scientific knowledge from change processes. These two aspects are for him not a random win-win situation for scientists and practitioners, but a condition for a non-technocratic social science. "Unfortunately, there is nothing in the social laws and social research that forces the practitioner to goodness. Science gives both doctor and murderer, democracy and fascism, more freedom and power. The social scientist should also recognise his responsibility in this regard" (Lewin, 1951, p. 295).

Given that there are a multitude of values in a pluralistic society, democratic dialogue (Gustavsen 1992) is the appropriate way of agreeing about values among the actors involved. In an action research project, the canon of values agreed upon for the improvement of a situation thus applies. This process may seem daring at first glance. However, since the practitioners from a concrete field of practice are dialogue partners of the scientists and provided that all dialogue partners (including the practitioners) participate in the dialogue on an equal footing, my experience is that the agreed upon values and the subsequent results of the action meet democratic criteria.

To support this consideration, I refer to Dewey's theory of democracy[8]. John Dewey's "Liberalism and Social Action" (Dewey 1935/1980) develops the concept of an *experimentally advancing history process* as an alternative to the idea that "human history takes the form of lawful progress." According to Dewey, the normative guide to experimentally seeking what constitutes the most comprehensive response to a socially problematic situation must be understood as the idea of freeing from barriers which resist free communication of society members for the purpose of intelligent problem-solving. *"The more potentials can be released and realized ... the more unconstrained the individual elements can interact with each other; from this, Dewey concludes that within the sphere of influence of human communities, the possibilities created therein can only be fully realized if all their members are able to participate as freely and unconstrained as possible in the communication...".* (Emphasis WF)

"The historical-social experiments lead to better, more stable solutions.... the more comprehensively those concerned by the problem are involved in their exploration; for with each further freeing of communication from limits, the capacity of the community concerned to perceive as much as possible increases the currently idle potentials that would be suitable for a productive solution of the encountered difficulty" (Honneth 2015, p. 96-100).

In other words, the innovative potential of the citizens of a society or the workforce of a company, as well as their anthropologically based need for self-determination and democratic participation, must 'only' be liberated and made possible in order to develop a democratic society, whose members take together decisions concerning their present and future

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8   In the following, I take over the summary of Dewey's core idea of his theory of democracy in the depiction of Honneth (Honneth, 2015, p. 96-100).

in egalitarian discourses. Action research is such an experimental procedure in the spirit of John Dewey, which explores and tests possibilities of democratic shaping of the working world with the participation of all concerned. With its resources it contributes to expand the field of communicative action as far as possible into the economy: economic and ecological democracy, post-growth society, equal rights for peoples, global peace would be the big goals; democratic participation in as many concrete practical contexts as possible, the little concrete steps enabled by action research.

3.4   Action Research – Motor of Social Movements for Industrial Democracy?

In political and social practice, the utopia of industrial democracy meets, as we all know, with the greatest opposition. This has also been experienced by Norwegian action research.

The Norwegian action research programme for the promotion of industrial democracy emerged in the 1960s from the consideration that a democratic society could only be named as such if democratic conditions prevailed also in the economy. In a large number of Norwegian companies, action researchers engaged in experiments with which they wanted to showcase how democratic processes and structures can be developed at company level. They organised forms of democratic participation in the form of practical discourses, in which they participated as scientists along with practitioners in order to conceptualise change processes and learn from them for theoretical discourses. They learned that words as well as theoretical propositions are not sufficient to effect changes in practice, but that participation in practical discourses, i.e., the opening of theory for practice is required; they also learned to share responsibility for the practice changes developed and agreed upon with practitioners.

In Norway, in the 1960s and 1970s, as part of the industrial democracy program, a wealth of experimentation on industrial democracy emerged in enterprises, some of which became internationally known as so-called "star cases" (Emery/Thorsrud 1982). These were projects of a model character, i.e., they took place in sheltered rooms under special, unusual conditions. Their claim was to model how democratic participation in enterprises would be organised if, yes, if the conditions under which these experiments were successful could be generalised, e.g. in that social forces (trade unions, democratic parties), in the framework of a successful labour policy, would advocate a generalisation of the conditions for democratic participation and in the perspective of economic democracy.

This expectation was not fulfilled. Emery and Thorsrud expressed disappointment at the lack of support from the unions. The Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions launched no national campaign to involve tens of thousands of people in the discussion on 'everyday democracy', as Emery and Thorsrud had expected. In the national unions there was initially little understanding of the two necessarily complementary aspects of industrial democracy: representation systems on the one hand and democratisation in the workplace on the other. (Emery and Thorsrud 1982, p. 143).

This diffusion deficit remained until the end of the programme. In their final report, Emery and Thorsrud state that the new labour unions' working environment policy shows that "the structure of the union in Norway is not yet ready for change ... In 1973 and 1974, the Confederation of Trade Unions and the large national unions formulated the political

basis on work environment, including health and safety, shiftwork and working time, pace of work and monotony, etc. In other words, they had turned away from the core concern of the industrial democratisation program, the democratisation of the workplace (issues such as alienation and authority) ..." (Idem, p. 153).

An attempt to overcome the diffusion deficit was undertaken by the Norwegian action researcher Björn Gustavsen. At his suggestion, Norwegian employers' organisations and trade unions in the early 1980s grappled with the difficulties that had made attempts to democratise work fail so far. They reached agreements on questions of work organisation and the initiation of operational and / or regional development based on local co-operation (Gustavsen 1985). The agreements dealt less with issues than with procedures. The most important of these were dialogue conferences, which Gustavsen saw as the institutionalisation of a "mediating discourse" that gave all actors interested in the democratic development of working life, such as a region, sector or cluster of companies, the opportunity to discuss together what they wanted to achieve / change and how they wanted to do it (Gustavsen 2001, p. 18). Theoretical and practical discourses, which dealt with the actual processes of change in organisations, companies, regions, were evaluated and co-ordinated in the mediating discourses.

With the invention of the mediating discourse and the dialogue conferences, diffusion processes were integrated from the beginning into all individual projects of the action research programme. Thus, Gustavsen had not only developed an instrument to attract scientists and practitioners from companies but also actors from the social environment (labour market parties, regional and municipal representatives) for dialogues about change, but he had also found an answer to the question of how theoretical and practical discourses on how theory and practice could become "coupled" (Vobruba). The subject of the mediating discourse was the question "how to communicate about change ... In this focus three "poles" could be identified: a discourse on theory; a discourse on practical action; and a discourse on how to link them" (Gustavsen 2001, p. 19).

Gustavsen refers to Habermas' theory of communicative action as a theoretical foundation for his approach. He emphasises the immense practical significance of Habermas' theory that communication is a constitutive force of social life (as John Dewey did in 1935), but contradicts his assertion that researchers are so involved in the practical side of the issue through participation in practical discourses that their participation in theoretical discourses is no longer possible (Gustavsen 2001, p. 18). A process of liberation does not have to start with a theory, as Habermas argues for the relationship between theory, practice and social change, but rather with (modified) practice, preceded by, and at the end of, a communicative process between all actors involved in the project and in the social environment based on an agreement about what should be changed and who should take on which task. We did the same in our action research projects, and I agree with Gustavsen on the basis of our experience.

With the integration of diffusion strategies into the concept and practice of the action research programmes he has led, Gustavsen has tried to extend the temporary programmes to social movements. In particular, the involvement of societal actors in the communication process of action research programmes through dialogue conferences was an important tool. "To reach scale (i.e. social movement, WF) there must be two processes of 'diffusion' running in parallel: one within the research community, one among the people concerned"

(Gustavsen 2003, p. 97). In Norway, this concept has in some cases actually succeeded in generating sustainable development processes at regional level through the involvement of all relevant actors (employees, local and regional unions and employers' organisations, representatives of local and regional authorities) (Qvale 2008). At the national level, however, this was not possible permanently in Norway or Sweden. In the Swedish LOM Program[9], 60 social scientists have been trained as action researchers by participating in action research projects, they could in the future become actors of a social movement to democratise work, but not even in Scandinavia have the social conditions for the emergence of a movement as envisioned by Gustavsen been met, let alone in continental Europe.

In action research projects, it succeeds time and again to liberate small groups of practical actors from the subjectification trap and thereby make them capable of acting, but in view of the still prevailing neo-liberalism, no social movements are emerging from this. At present, even in Scandinavia, there is a lack of social actors (especially the unions lacking sufficient power resources) that could make the action-research-tested vision of democratising work politically viable. The limit that the industrial democracy programme in Norway was unable to overcome in the 1960s (Emery and Thorsrud 1982) still remains.

3.5   Democratic dialogue as a place of collective reflection

A central component of a future democratisation of work is the democratic dialogue. Democratic dialogues are processes of collective reflection in which practitioners and action researchers can collectively exercise democratic practice, and develop and agree on projects to shape work and its conditions. The Norwegian action researcher Björn Gustavsen has developed the concept of democratic dialogue and practiced it many times in action research projects, as well as in the context of mediating discourses in dialogue conferences involving social actors (Gustavsen 1992).

Greenwood and Levin point out that action research democratises the relationship between researchers ("professional researchers") and practitioners ("local interested parties") (Greenwood and Levin 1998, p. 4). This implies that, when collaborating with practitioners, scientists abandon the oft-cited claim of superiority of scientific over practical knowledge (epistemic rupture). That is easier said than done. Very often, scientists need to develop skills in the research process that they could not acquire in their academic education. These include, above all, dialogical skills such as the ability to listen, the ability to individual and collective (self-)reflection, to learn from the practical actors in the common research process, to bring into the dialogue one's own knowledge in a comprehensive and understandable way, but at the same time open to new aspects. Of course, these requirements also apply to practitioners; their knowledge is based more on experience, and their work experiences include the fact that new experiences can relativise existing knowledge, but can also develop it further.

The cooperative relationship of scientists and practitioners in the field of research, founded on self-reflection of the participating actors, is, in addition to the special theory-practice relationship, another central feature of action research. Herbert Fitzek described in a small essay, in a very original but plausible way in analogy to Velazquez's painting "Las

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9   LOM = Leadership, Organisation, Medbestämmande

Meninas" from the 17th century[10], that a special feature of action research lies in the fact that the researcher not only discovered his presence in the field of research, but that he also perceives himself there as an actor: "As with Velazquez ... the attention to the observer as an actor ... (calls attention to the fact) that the 'extra-worldliness' ... of the researcher is a beautiful fiction, with which human science wants to ennoble itself to the status of natural sciences' exactness – although precisely modern physics has long rejected the ideal of subject-independent constitution of objects" (Fitzek 2011, p. 169).

While Lewin's understanding of the researcher's presence and active role in the field of research was initially "only" a methodological innovation, it also had a normative aspect, since it involved human relationships between scientific and practice actors in the research process. The action researcher will therefore not only, as is common practice, account for his subjective influence on the research result, but he will also seek to reflect on his relationship with his co-operation partners in the field of research and seek to shape it democratically.

Democratic dialogues are a field of practice to democratise relationships between representatives of different groups in an organisation, from top management to shop floor employees. In such heterogeneous groups power relations, based on position, training, habitus, eloquence, etc. play a major role. Some action researchers even go so far as to call participation referring to Foucault, in general, as "enactment of power", i.e., power games, and by no means only refer to those dialogues whose participants represent a large power gap (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2011).

Although power often shapes human relationships, I find that attitude too static; it obscures the fact that partcipative democratic dialogues are processes in which democratic attitudes can be practiced: also and especially between people of different hierarchical positions. Experience from a variety of action research shows that democratic dialogues and participation do not make power relations disappear, but that they are very successful in subordinating and thereby reducing the exercise of power to democratic rules. Democratic dialogues become democracy exercises in this way. A look at the criteria of democratic dialogues (Gustavsen 1992, p. 3-4) shows that they can change the way power is used in hierarchical structures in the long term and can contribute to the democratisation of hierarchically structured practice in organisations.

For reasons of space, I cannot present the catalogue of criteria for democratic dialogue here. Instead, I limit myself to the presentation of their basic idea using three criteria as an example. "Practical work experience is the prerequisite for participation. It is, by definition, the only type of experience that all participants have". Participants should be able to allow for a growing level of disagreement. – The dialogue should at all times lead to agreements that can serve as a platform for a practical action. It should be noted that there is no contradiction between this criterion and the preceding one. The main strength of a democratic system compared to all the rest is that it allows a wide range of opinions and ideas to be put in-

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10 In this painting, depicting the Spanish court of the 17th century, the artist can be seen in the background while working on the easel. But whom does he portray? Among the many possible interpretations, Fitzek chooses the one who lets the artist portray the viewer of the picture, especially as the artist looks in the direction of the viewer. The viewer is also part of the picture.

to practice while allowing decisions that can be supported by all those involved" (Criteria 5, 12 and 13, Gustavsen 1992, p. 4).

Equal participation in the research process does not mean that scientists and practitioners are pursuing the same goal. Both groups of actors remain attached to the social and work contexts from which they originate when they come together for a limited time to co-operate. Scientists remain members of their community; in addition to the action research process, they also pursue particular, specific interests: the scientists want to generate scientific knowledge that they can put up for discussion in their specialist disciplines; analogously, the practitioners are interested in design processes, i.e., in actions that lead to an improvement of their situation. But beyond that, their interest also focuses on the development of new practical knowledge, new work experience, new working methods that can be used in the professional discourse with his/her work colleagues, a new working practice, a new form of work organisation or the organisation of democratic participation processes and new organisational dialogue spaces as standard of their praxis.

New practical knowledge and new working methods are constantly emerging in the context of changing work activity. Processes of digitalisation of production and services open up new possibilities for action research and democratic participation[11], insofar as they take place in companies. Particularly in small and medium-sized IT companies, forms of modern, co-operative work emerge that demonstrate the relevance of action research. Digitalised work requires employees to act like action researchers: they analyse and think through their work practices to find innovative solutions, and they do so co-operatively; in a process of collective reflection on their work (Langemeyer 2015). This practice corresponds exactly to the practice of action research. Ines Langemeyer describes digitalised work she has empirically examined as "the scientification of work practice, which requires a form of intellectuality that is both practical and scientific, specific and general" (Langemeyer 2015, p. 31/32).

At the same time, Langemeyer also points to the flip side of processes of digitalisation. She shows how the digitalisation of production and services in conjunction with the accumulation of Big Data leads to global concentration of democratically uncontrolled power, as accumulated by the global companies Google, Amazon, Facebook, etc. With their economic and cultural power, the large data corporations undermine democratic structures (van Dijck 2018; Dolata and Schrape 2018), thus posing a considerable challenge for action research and the possibility of democratic participatory processes.

3.6   Outlook: Action Research in Platform Economy

Finally, I would like to discuss whether and how action research under the conditions of digitalised work in platform economics is possible, which effects it can have and which questions arise from the most recent forms of digital employment for action research. None of the previous three editions of the *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, 2008; Bradbury, 2015) contains reports on platform economy action research projects; it is a new field for action research.

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11   The effects of digitalisation in platform economics are different; see the next section.

So far, action research projects are taking place in companies, municipalities or regions, i.e, in rooms where the workers are physically present and co-operate as groups in work processes. However, in the platform economy, organisations are no longer the place of work and added value. Online work is developing a new way of organising work in the form of crowd work, in which the activities are carried out via an online platform or mobile applications (apps). The work is usually done in the homes of the workers; it is extremely flexible in terms of time and is thus unbounded to a degree that is unknown from company-organised work. Companies use crowdsourcing to gain access to an initially unknown number of jobseekers (crowd), thereby opening up greater potential for skills and manpower than they would be able to maintain in companies. They do not need their own infrastructure, but they use the infrastructure of the workers, in the case of Uber and Airbnb their cars and apartments. In platform economics, companies put work orders online with the help of external or proprietary platforms. Job seekers can register on these platforms and then apply for work assignments. The orders range from extremely detailed subtasks (microtasks) as a result of digital Taylorisation, which are paid to the so-called clickworkers with cents per Microtask (Click) (for example, checking addresses and phone numbers) to design and innovative or creative tasks (design of company logos or websites; translations; creation of publicity texts; programming; graphic design, design of t-shirts). In the so-called Share Economy, clients and contractors are brought in contact via a platform: new markets are organised online, orders such as taxi and delivery services are no longer handled online, but real: car owners make their cars available for Uber, and homeowners their homes for Airbnb. (For more details and the following information see Leimeister et al. 2016a and 2016b).

The platform economy reinforces and accelerates the long-term tendency towards ever more precarious employment, not only in the US (Srnicek 2017, p. 80), but increasingly also in Western Europe. The crowdworkers 'situation vis-à-vis the company and the (external or corporate) platform as a virtual market, where corporate orders and crowdworkers' demands meet, is precarious and characterised by many uncertainties and disadvantages:

–   The status of the crowdworker is unclear; the companies see and treat them as self-employed (in fact, they are fictitious self-employed).
–   As a rule, the crowdworkers work separated spatially and temporally. Among them there is competition[12] for the orders of the companies.
–   Crowdworking is a fast-growing, extreme form of the low pay and flexibilisation of work. The payment of the Crowdworker is extremely low, it is determined by the platform or the offering company. Microtasks are remunerated with cent amounts per click. For 79% of the crowdworkers, the income earned is a secondary income; so far as it is the main income source, the earning is only € 1,500 per month with a weekly working time of 80 hours (Leimeister et al, 2016 b, p 10)[13].

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12 Crowdworkers can register on a platform. They are scored by the platform or the company according to their work results and can gradually acquire the status of specialists / experts for certain work assignments.
13 Representative studies on the situation of crowdworkers are missing so far; The two Leimeister studies and the report by Pongratz and Bormann (2017) are among the first empirical analyses of online work and crowdwork in general. The Leimeister studies contain important and interesting information, but are not based on a representative sample.

−   More qualified orders will be paid either on a profit or time basis. In the case of result-based compensation, only the winners selected by the company or the platform usually receive a payment, all other crowdworkers go out empty-handed; the right of design projects for websites or products often remain with the entrepreneur.
−   There is a pronounced power asymmetry between crowdworkers and companies or platform operators, intensified by the Internet-based form of communication. Crowdworkers suffer greatly from non-transparent or imperceptible monitoring methods of the platform operators. It can happen that the crowdworkers are informed succinctly via the Internet that he/she should adhere more closely to the specification of the task he/she is working on. This machine-mediated, one-sided form of communication, the absence of direct personal contacts, precludes any form of respectful human relationships from the outset.

The brief sketch of their working conditions (further details in Leimeister et al. 2016a and b; Pongratz and Bormann 2017) shows that crowdworkers do not yet have any power resources (Brinkmann et al. 2008, p. 24). They lack structural power because their economic position in the labuor market or in the production / service process is extremely weak due to their isolation and in the face of competition. They do not have any organisational power yet; it is only since 2016 that unions have made isolated attempts to organise crowdworkers. The IG Metall has on 8.11.2017, publicly reported on the creation of a "Crowdworking Platform Ombudsman" to mediate conflicts between crowdworkers and platform companies. It should also be noted that the "Frankfurt Declaration on Platform-Based Work" of various European trade unions, with the participation of IG Metall on December 6, 2016, appeals to the customers and operators of platforms to pay workers the minimum wage, giving them access to social security (unemployment benefits and health insurance), to organise a neutral mediation in conflicts between employees and companies, to create transparency about the evaluation of employees, their qualifications and their work and, above all, to respect their right to a coalition (all information on Faircrowd.work/de/unions). In addition, various platform operators have agreed on a "Code of Conduct", which sets out ten principles for fair collaboration between browser sourcing companies and crowdworkers (crowdsourcing-code.de).

I have briefly summarised the main shortcomings and precarious features of the working conditions of crowdworkers and the initial reactions of German and European trade unions to show that the building of organisational power is (a) urgent and (b) still at the very beginning. However, the overall picture also includes crowdworkers developing their own initiatives to improve their situation. Here are three examples:

Among the food couriers of the British company Deliveroo, there has recently been a first strike when Deliveroo hired his messengers in Akkord, i.e., intended to pay per delivery instead of a fixed hourly wage. "The drivers organised a parade through the city ... all the way to the company headquarters, where they confronted a manager." He wanted to talk to each dissatisfied person individually, but: "We all want the same," said one of the drivers: an hourly wage of 8 pounds. In the end Deliveroo renounced the new payment model "... It was one of the first big fights of the Gig Economy, and many observers were amazed at how much the drivers held together" (Kramer, 2017).

In New York City 24 co-operatives (almost exclusively of women) have been set up, operating car rental companies independently of Uber. Women drivers who joined these co-operatives could increase their hourly wages from U$ 10 to U$ 25 (Scholz 2017).

In April 2017 employees of the Austrian bicycle delivery service Foodora founded the first works council of a platform company. They were assisted by the vida-Road Department, member of the Austrian Trade Union Federation ÖGB (Kuba 2017).

These examples show that creativity, the potential for criticism and resistance, the ability to act in solidarity and the knowledge of their interests, in short: the innovative qualifications among the platform economy employees as well as all dependent employees, and even under the extremely difficult conditions of this form of digital work, can be activated.

The isolation of employees can also be overcome, as the examples show. Drawing on the experience of joint action, platforms could be organized: let us call them Action Research Platforms, where crowdworkers, encouraged by action researchers, to share their work experiences, reflect on desired improvements, reflect on resistance to initiatives to shape their working conditions, and discuss to find ways to cope, briefly enter into a process of collective reflection in which actions are taken to improve their current situation.

One can think of inviting participants to seminars[14] in an action research platform in order to reflect on their situation with action researchers in democratic dialogues and to discuss and agree on options for action. For example, how can workers organise themselves a platform that they own, through which they obtain orders from companies and distribute them among themselves according to rules that are their own? The pay could be negotiated with the companies, if possible with the support of a union. Or: Crowdworkers can, based on the experiences of British couriers or New York taxi drivers, develop opportunities to form co-operatives, including the necessary infrastructure (apps), eliminating companies such as Uber, Airbnb, Deliveroo, Foodora, etc.

The conclusion is that the many activities of crowdworkers to improve their working conditions are based on their creativity, their commitment to their interests and their ability to act individually and in groups, in short: their innovative qualifications. With the support of the trade unions and supported by the determination of the workers, first attempts are being made to progressively achieve good working conditions in the platform economy as well; action researchers can build on these initiatives, reinforcing them and thus trying to fulfill the promise of action research: from the subjectification trap to a competent and active person.

However, it should be remembered that crowdworkers are extremely dependent on platform economics, and in many ways are hindered in self-determined collective action. The increasing tendency to precariousness of their employment relationships, of the spatio-temporal delimitation of their work and the resulting isolation has been mentioned above. In addition, platform economics is destroying social and welfare institutions such as co-determination (see Combating work Councils and Ver.di's years of unsuccessful attempts to agree on a retailer collective agreement at Amazon). They refuse to enter into employment relationships at all, and treat crowdworkers as self-employed workers in order to deprive them of employee rights. In this way, they are fundamentally changing the way in which capitalist companies function: outsourcing and lean management are being taken to the extreme, jobs are being fragmented and scattered by fake self-employed, companies have discovered a new raw material: data, whose collection and processing not only destroy

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14   Allies can be trade unions, which have already started organizing seminars with crowdworkers, and are also making initial efforts to organise crowdworkers. See the above-mentioned Frankfurt Declaration of various European trade unions with participation of IG Metall in 2016

privacy and create large surveillance capacities (Srnicek 2017, p. 102), but also acquire a great deal of power to use them to destroy civil society and parliamentary democracy (example: Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and the US Congress 2017 elections).

In short, the platform enterprise grows great economic and socially uncontrolled power, which they are determined to apply (Dolata 2018). "These companies are anything but mere information owners; on the contrary, they are increasingly owners of the infrastructure of society. Therefore, the analysis of their effects on the economy as a whole must always consider the monopolistic tendencies of these platforms" (Srnicek 2017, p. 93). All Big Data companies are working to build their own privatised Internet: "... Amazon's cloud network is nothing more than a private Internet, and Microsoft and Facebook are working together on their own transatlantic fiber-optic cable" (ibid, p. 112-113).

In this way, a power complex emerges in society, which until now has hardly been politically controlled and which is inaccessible to any attempt to expand democratic procedures, tested in small contexts, to larger social contexts. "Today, the central question is: How can the extensive privatisation and commercialisation of the public in the network and the completely detached activities of the socially and politically mission-conscious corporations still be effectively limited? One thing is certain: it will not work without politics" (Dolata 2018, p. 86). The previous attempts of policies to regulate Big Data, including the Network Enforcement Act of 2018, are not suitable for this purpose (Dolata 2018).

The analysis of the social effects of a growing platform economy is still in its infancy. An outstanding example is the work of José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal "The Platform Society. Public Values in a Connective World". The authors describe the societal effects of platform economics as follows: "Online digital platforms, which are overwhelmingly American-based and operated, have penetrated every sector of American and Western European societies, disrupting markets and labour relations, circumventing institutions and transforming social and civic practices. Platforms steer users' behavior and social traffic that is increasingly data-driven and algorithmically organised. They are gradually infiltrating in, and clashing with, the institutional processes through which European democratic societies are organised. Platforms are neither neutral nor value-free constructs; the norms and values inscribed in their architectures may clash with the societal structures in which they are gradually embedded. So the emerging 'platform society' involves an intensive struggle between competing ideological systems and contesting social actors: market, government and civil society, raising important questions like: Who is or should be responsible and accountable for anchoring public values in a platform society?" (van Dijck et al. 2018).

Of course, these gloomy prospects for the endangerment of democratic social institutions by Big Data and their algorithms are jeopardising the possibilities of practicing democratic behaviour, dialogue and the development change processes by actionable and self-confident social actors through action research. Nevertheless, this must be tried again and again.

Finally, I would like to mention two perspectives that express the resilience of people and make success seem possible in the long term:

1. The necessity and effectiveness of utopias mentioned several times in the text. "Our inability to imagine a different life would be capital's ultimate triumph" (Scholz 2017). Anything else would be the capitulation to the worldwide triumph of an unregulated, unrestrained, globally-unbounded capitalism.

2. Who, if not the billions of "ordinary people" can muster the radical power to "sabotage" the production of the eternally mobilised and global capitalist-minded people, following the irritating stubbornness with which ordinary people confirm their Humanity ... A radical break-up of the given is still possible, since "the basic human virtues[15] in the lowest classes of society are still widespread" (Michéa 2014, p. 184, 189). The historically recurrent sources of power of self-determined individuals (common decency, basic human virtues, and workers' innovative skills) justify the perspectives of democratic participation and industrial democracy that guided this work.

Michéa refers to the concept of common decency, the elements of which George Orwell has formulated a variety of essays on the lives of ordinary people (Orwell 1984) and which Bruce Bégout summarises as follows: "The basic virtues of the ordinary people include" une dignité ordinaire, un sens viscéral de l'egalite, du respect mutuel, de la simplicité et de la solidarité". Common decency "n'est pas seulement un qualité morale (le sens de l'honneteté), mais aussi un compartiment social et une certaine forme d'estime de soi (a form of self-esteem)". Above all, however, Orwell reckons to the basic virtues of humans the instinctive rejection of the rule of human over human, i.e., thus, in my words, the need for self-determination as an anthropological constant: "ils épreuvent une aversion quasi instinctive pour toute domination de l'homme sur l'homme". For Orwell, clinging to these basic virtues is the basis of his hope for a better society: "La reconnaissance de la decence ordinaire c'est donc fondamentale, puisqu'en elle réside riens de moins que la source de toute société juste. Il existe en effect dans la vie des gens simples des qualités sociales absolument primordiales (désintérèt (selflessness, WF), solidarité, dégout pour la domination) pour toute institution politique de la vie en commun" (All quotes from Bégout, 2006, p. 100, 101, 106, 107, 108).

Orwell does not propose an apotheosis of the "ordinary people" here. He does not ignore the negative aspects of the common people's customs, such as their sensibility (sensiblerie), their distrust of strangers, their tendency to fatalism (Bégout 2006, p. 107, translation WF). However, all in all he conveys an impression of the power of the people, of their power to change reality ("une force immanent qui modifie le reel", ibid., p. 116). Unfortunately, this power of the people, the basic virtues of the "ordinary people" on which it rests, is today suppressed and alienated by the neoliberal-capitalist strategies of subjectification in Foucault's sense. Action research has, in the accessible social contexts, the task and the opportunity to rediscover and stabilise the ability and the need of the practitioners for self-determination.

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15 By this Michéa means the basic human virtues of giving, taking and giving back, which are the basis of trust and solidarity beyond the calculative capitalist exchange logic. Elsewhere, he refers to the concept of common decency, which George Orwell used to describe the basic human virtues deeply rooted in concrete socialism (Bégout 2006).

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