

The Role of Action Research in Social Transformation: Memories and Projections

Danilo R. Streck

Abstract

The conference “Coping with the future: Business and Work in the digital age – A cross disciplinary conference” (Agder University, Norway, on October 8-10, 2018) had one section dedicated to “The role of action research in social transformation”. The text contextualises the theme within the trajectory of the *International Journal of Action Research*, and more particularly of the biannual international conferences organised with the support of the journal. It was prepared for opening for the work of this section of the conference, and served as introduction to the presentation of other papers published in this issue.

Key words: Action research, International Journal of Action Research, social transformation, social sciences

La Función De La Investigación-Acción En La Transformación Social: Memorias Y Proyecciones

Resumen

La conferencia “Enfrentando el futuro: Negocios y Trabajo en la era digital - Una conferencia interdisciplinaria” (Agder University, Noruega, del 8 al 10 de octubre de 2018) tuvo una sección dedicada a “El papel de la investigación-acción en la transformación social”. El texto contextualiza el tema dentro de la trayectoria de la Revista Internacional de Investigación- Acción, y particularmente de las conferencias internacionales bianuales organizadas con el apoyo de la revista. Se preparó para la apertura del trabajo de esta sección de la conferencia, y sirvió como introducción para la presentación de otros trabajos publicados en este número.

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción, Revista Internacional de Investigación-Acción, transformación social, ciencias sociales.

Some words about the background

As executive editor of the *International Journal of Action Research* (IJAR) and in the name of my fellow editors, I welcome the opportunity for our journal to be part of the conference

“Coping with the future: Business and Work in the digital age – A cross disciplinary conference”. My opening words will be dedicated to contextualise the theme of this section of the conference titled “The role of action research in social transformation” within the trajectory of IJAR, and more particularly of the biannual international conferences organised with the support of IJAR.

Going back in the history of action research, we realise that since its beginning action research has been concerned with work and transformation, more precisely with the social and economic conditions of workers. Kurt Lewin, in his seminal article “Action Research and Minority Problems” from 1945 refers to “an interview survey among workers in intergroup relations in the State of Connecticut”. At his time and context, he was concerned with racial relations and the so-called minority problems, which he rightly acknowledges as majority problems. In this article he sets the basic principle of action research when placing it “within social life”, and asking questions that still echo in the social sciences: “When, where, and by whom should social research be done?” (p. 37) Furthermore, he advocates an “integrated approach to social research,” which could mean cooperation among disciplines or the amalgamation into one social science. Economics, he remarks, should necessarily be included in this symphony.

Also Karl Marx, whose bicentennial birth date is being commemorated in 2018, cannot be forgotten when dealing with research on work and transformation. In “A Workers’ Inquiry” from 1880 he challenges the French republic to have a serious look into the country’s working class, and to investigate the “facts and crimes of capitalist exploitation” even with the poor resources that were at his disposal. The novelty of this inquiry consists in the active role attributed to the workers to describe their reality with the “full knowledge” that only they possess:

We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer and that only they, and not saviors sent by providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills which they are prey. We also rely upon socialists of all schools who, being wishful for social reform, must wish for an *exact* and *positive* knowledge of the conditions in which the working class — the class to whom the future belongs -works and moves (Marx 1997).

Right after World War II, in 1946, the creation of the Tavistock Institute represents a landmark for action research and its contribution to social transformation, especially in Europe. In the Preface to the Institute’s anthology, *Social Engagement of Social Sciences*, the editors (Trist and Murray 1989) explain that the use of the word *engagement* is not accidental: “The word ‘engagement’ (which echoes the French Existentialist usage) has been chosen as the best single word to represent the process by which social scientists endeavour actively to relate themselves in relevant and meaningful ways to society”. It represents the intention to approximate theory and practice, action and reflection, and connect the micro or personal to the macro or social in consultancy and research with communities and organisations.

From there, it is a short distance to the Scandinavian countries, where, among so many successful action research practices, we could identify the LOM (*Leitung, Organisation and Mitbestimmung* program in Sweden). Björn Gustavsen (1994, p. 25) highlights the relation of action research to social transformation when, referring to the program, he writes:

It is certainly not enough, simply to say: ‘Now we would like to go to B (from A) – through simple discourse we will not arrive there. Furthermore, we need to have a representation of how to start the movement: which questions and problems have to be touched, and what is to be done? If transformation is a step by step movement, what do the particular steps look like?’

In Germany, Werner Fricke, reflecting on the action and research program “Humanisation of work life” [Humanisierung der Arbeitsleben], from 1974 to 1981, writes about the hidden potential for transformation of workers once there is created space for them to actively and democratically participate in decisions concerning their work place and life. Based on research activities with workers he is quite categorical: “The democratisation of work can only be the work of the workers themselves” [Die Demokratisierung der Arbeit kann nur das Werk der Arbeitenden selbst sein] (Fricke 2012, p. 39).

At about the same time, without necessarily knowing of each other, there was conducted research “with people”, sometimes under different names, but inspired and guided by similar epistemological and political principles. From the perspective of Third World countries, we have the following statement by Orlando Fals Borda: “We were sociologists, anthropologists, economists, theologians, artists, farmers, educators and social workers. Thus, it was a diverse and complex group, some of whom had decided to abandon the academic routines in universities to dedicate ourselves to alternative search.” Then he goes on naming colleagues from places as diverse as India and Brazil, or México and Africa.

The International Journal of Action Research

The *International Journal of Action Research* is a continuation of the journal *Concepts and transformation* (CAT), founded in 1995 and published by John Benjamins (Amsterdam). The founders, Björn Gustavsen, Øyvind Palshaugen and Hans van Beinum, soon thereafter were joined by Werner Fricke and Richard Enns. The choice of John Benjamins was due to the personal relations of Hans van Beinum, the first editor-in-chief¹, with the publisher. A key concern was the relation of AR and society, as well expressed in Gustavsen’s article of 2003, where he addresses the issue of how AR can overcome the single case dilemma. His first recommendation was not just to replace one single case with a larger number of single cases, but to create or support *social movements*.

In 2004, due to changes in the publishing policy of John Benjamins, who made the decision to terminate all book series and journals outside their core area, which was linguistics, it was necessary to find a new publisher for CAT. Werner Fricke’s arguments to convince Hampp were not based on a strategy of narrowing the scope of the journal. Instead, he argued in favour of *widening* the scope of the journal, both geographically and intellectually. Hampp Verlag found his argumentation sound, and the *International Journal of Action Research* was born 2005, with Werner Fricke as editor-in-chief.²

The guidelines of the journal, stated in the editorial information page, are as follows:

1 Øyvind Pålshaugen was co-editor with Hans van Beinum from 1996

2 See Editorial to *International Journal of Action Research* 6 (1), 2015:11-15.

The *International Journal of Action Research* provides a forum for an open and non-dogmatic discussion about action research, both its present situation and future perspectives. This debate is open to the variety of action research concepts worldwide. The focus is on dialogue between theory and practice.

The *International Journal of Action Research* is problem driven; it is centred on the notion that organizational, regional and other forms of social development should be understood as multidimensional processes and viewed from a broad socio-ecological, participative and societal perspective.

In 2017, due to Rainer Hampp's retirement and the closing of his publishing business, a new move had to be taken. It was again Werner Fricke who took up the not so easy task to negotiate with the new prospective publishers. Making a long story short, we are happy to be hosted by Barbara Budrich Verlag, a respectful and well-known German publisher. There have been no changes in the journal's editorial policy.

Although each issue has a value and identity of its own, there are some issues that occupy a special space in the journal's trajectory. The issue that makes the transition from *Concepts and Transformation* to *International Journal of Action Research* represents Werner Fricke's concern of overcoming a Eurocentric perspective of action research, when he invited authors from Latin America to take up the word. The first article is an interview with Orlando Fals Borda with the suggestive title "One sows the seed, but it has its own dynamics", suggesting that no one has control on the real and lasting impact on his/her work.³

In 2007 IJAR published an issue on the "Diversity of Action Research: Experiences and Perspectives"⁴ where well-known and experienced researchers present their views on AR. In the Introduction Oyvind Paulshaugen (2007, p. 13) reminds us that "as will be demonstrated in this issue of IJAR, it may be more appropriate to state that there are certain different constellations of both practical and theoretical aspects of the research process that constitute the different approaches". This speaks for the non-dogmatic policy of the journal as a platform for open discussion of practices and ideas.

More recently, in 2015, Werner Fricke and Sabine Pfeiffer⁵ organised a special double issue on "Action Research perspectives in German social sciences". In the Preface they express their concern over the present day socio-political context for real democratic participation, this being a prerequisite for action research. There are, nevertheless, signs that something from the experience of action research in the humanisation of work life has survived, and the editors are confident that action research will grow in German social sciences.

These are examples of the journal's concern to broaden its scope, geographically and epistemologically. While the journal is quite well established in particular regions in Europe and Latin America, in recent years more submissions have been received from different places in Asia and Africa.

3 The special issue was organized by guest editors Danilo Streck and Carlos Rodrigues Brandão. The interview was conducted by Lola Cendales, Fernando Torres and Alfonso Torres [IJAR 1 (1), 9-42]

4 The authors that contributed article are Marianne Kristiansen, Olav Eikeland, John Shotter, Bjorn Gustavsen, Danilo Streck, Davydd Greenwood, Bob Dick, Margareth Vickers, Gil Colemann and Margaret Geary.

5 International Journal of Action Research 11 (1-2), 2015.

The Action/Participatory Research conferences

The editors' concerns with Action Research, however, go beyond the publication of a good journal. It is their understanding that the journal has also a formative dimension, and the idea of an academy of action research popped up once in a while. In place of an association or academy, probably with a restricted membership, itinerant gatherings are being organised, either with the name of symposium, conference or congress. The spirit that illuminates these encounters is to bring together people who share concerns that fall under the umbrella of action research, be they experienced researchers or students in the process of becoming researchers, be they associated with academic or with organizational contexts. This one, in Kristiansand, is the fourth of the series of gatherings.

The first one took place in Brazil (Porto Alegre, from June 20 to 22, 2011) under the title *International Symposium on Action and Participatory Research*, organized by Danilo R. Streck, Emil A. Sobottka, Edla Eggert and Telmo Adams, affiliated with universities in the Porto Alegre metropolitan area.⁶ The central focus of the symposium, as stated in the call for papers, was on qualitative social research that uses methodologies and strategies in which researchers and participants in the research process constitute close, intensive and long term relations as a way to observe social contexts, gather information, analyse and interpret data, report on the acquired knowledge and systematise their experience as a tool for critical and transformative action in their social contexts.⁷ As may be noted, this quite wide scope allowed participation of professionals and students with distinct relations to action research.

The quotes of two beloved colleagues of the action research community, used in the opening of the symposium, express the search that certainly still inspires us today when gathering around action and/or participatory research:

An emergent paradigm for us would produce the articulation of science with conscience, and of the heart hand in hand with reason. (Orlando Fals Borda 2009, p. 336)

It seems a reasonable assumption that if the social sciences want to help construct the future and not only interpret the past, we can hardly avoid embarking on a course which will, in important respects, differ from the descriptive analytic tradition. What this means for notions such as 'research', 'science' and 'action research' is largely an open question. (Björn Gustavsen 2006, p. 24)

From Porto Alegre, the forum moved to Denmark (Copenhagen, from June 5 to 7, 2013) having as focus the tensions between participation and power in participatory research and action research. This *International Conference on Participation and power in participatory research and action research*, was hosted by the Department of Communication and Psychology and Department of Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University. The organizers, Marianne Kristiansen and Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen (2013, p. 7), in the Preface to the special issue which they co-edited as guest editors with selected papers from the conference⁸, proposed questions that remain major challenges.

6 Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS) and Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (UNISINOS).

7 Selected papers were published in a special issue of the International Journal of Action Research [12 (2), 2016], and a book in Portuguese (Streck, Sobottka and Eggert, *Conhecer e transformar*).

8 International Journal of Action Research, 9 (1), 2013.

What does co-production of objectives mean in situations like these (They refer to dilemmas such as choosing between efficiency or social change; solving immediate problems or challenging norms or assumptions, etc.)? Similarly, what is the *raison d'être* of endeavours toward co-designing of processes and co-evaluation of results when partners and researchers often have very different forms of knowledge and competencies? What does co-communicating results mean? Does it mean that partners draw maps of power relations, co-author articles and books, or? And what do they expect, themselves?

The third meeting took place in Colombia (Bogotá, from June 23 to 25, 2015) as *III Simposio Internacional de Investigacion Accion: Homenaje a Orlando Fals Borda* [III International Symposium of Action Research: a Homage to Orlando Fals Borda], organized and coordinated by Alfonso Torres Carrillo, from the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. As stated in the call for papers “in this next symposium we decided to focus the theme on methodological issues that are inherent to action research and participatory research. This emphasis will allow us to produce a critical appraisal in terms of problems, advances and methodological challenges of this research perspective in the beginning of this new century.”⁹

This conference in Kristiansand, organised by Werner Fricke together with the co-ordination of the conference “Coping with the future”, is a continuation of a process that hopefully can be continued in other places, integrating new researchers in the action community, and enriching the dialogue with new practices and reflections.

New – or old? – challenges for Action Research

In his contribution to the Porto Alegre symposium in 2011 Werner Fricke (2012, p. 36) highlighted the challenge that action research of any type should reflect, in practice and theory, on the socio-political conditions within which it is carried out. This is in no way an easy task in a globalised world system that entails divisions manifested throughout the world in the form of migrations, joblessness, economic and social inequalities, racial and gender discrimination, poverty and wars. In this context, the idea of social transformation itself has become a catchword, devoid of substantive meaning.

When referring to social transformation in terms of action research we are talking about values. For action researchers it should not be enough to make the system run smoother, introducing mechanisms of self-control that perpetuate inequalities and injustice. That's why the ethical-political dimension, which by the way permeates any research process usually in a hidden and implicit way, assumes an ineludible explicit character in action research. Who are our partners in the research process? What movements and powers do we strengthen or enable with our participation?

Everything starts, as Paulo Freire has taught us, with the reading of the world. A reading which is always an intersubjective and dialogical process that continuously

9 Selected papers were published in a special issue of the *International Journal of Action Research*, 12 (2), 2016).

problematises our being with others, and in and with the world. It is also a reading that is at the same time a pronouncing of the world, a word-in-action.¹⁰

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10 Paulo Freire coins the Portuguese word *palavração*, which is a combination of word plus action. See the entry "Word/Word-in-action [Palavra/Palavração]in the *Paulo Freire Encyclopedia* (Streck, Redin & Zitkoski, 2012)