# On Social Productivity and Future Perspectives on Action Research

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**Abstract:** The paper addresses some of the consequences of neoliberalism in our societies and argues that the phenomena that is being discussed under the label of *surveillance capitalism* has deep implications regarding action research. It fractures individuals into apolitical wants and needs, neutralising the core of action research which is the integrity of the individual and the social fabric. But this can be a two-way relationship, and action research can contribute to counteracting these trends by recreating the citizen actor and integrating individuals in society. To discuss how this can be done in practice, the paper shares some positive deviants, which are positive examples that emerge under unfavorable conditions. Through their discussion the paper poses future-oriented perspectives on action research.

**Keywords:** action research, neoliberalism, surveillance capitalism, individual and social resistance

**Sobre la productividad social y perspectivas de futuro de la investigación acción**

**Resumen:** El artículo analiza algunas de las consecuencias del neoliberalismo en nuestras sociedades y argumenta que el fenómeno que se está discutiendo bajo la etiqueta de *capitalismo de vigilancia* tiene implicaciones profundas en relación con la investigación acción. Las tiene porque fractura a los individuos en una serie de deseos y necesidades apolíticos, neutralizando el núcleo central de la investigación acción, que es la integridad de los individuos y del tejido social. Pero esta puede ser una relación bidireccional, y la investigación acción puede contraponerse a estas tendencias recreando a la ciudadanía como actor e integrando a los individuos en la sociedad. Para ver cómo esto puede hacerse en la práctica, se presentan una serie de desviaciones positivas, que son positivos casos que emergen en condiciones desfavorables. A través de su discusión, el artículo comparte algunas perspectivas de futuro de la investigación acción.

**Palabras claves:** Investigación acción, neoliberalismo, capitalismo de vigilancia, resistencia individual y social

1 This article is the result of an extended online collaboration initiated and orchestrated by Werner Fricke to pose the emergent challenges for action research in the face of the multiple global crises and problems humanity and our planet face. Four colleagues with very different work experiences from different parts of the globe, and operating in different organisational environments worked to find a way to develop a coherent argument without hiding our differences and diverse priorities. Through a considerable variety of video conferences and manuscript drafts, we believe we have come together with an article that manifests ways of making our differences count. We were gratified by the process, because it shows how our shared commitment to action research enabled us to derive strength and clarity from differences, and find a shared way forward toward a better and fairer future. Action research cannot speak with one voice because our differences can become our strengths, enabling us to deal better with the complexity of an increasingly threatened world.

## 1. Introduction

A century has gone by since Kurt Lewin's studies in the 1920s. Looking back on these 100 years of action research (AR), we realise that the world has changed considerably and is changing with increasing speed. Capitalism, especially in its uncontrolled, disembedded forms that have emerged with the rise of neo-liberalism and the "new public management" since the 1970s, is the main force revealing this change. It is accompanied by imminent environmental disaster, created by uncontrolled capitalist pillaging of planetary resources for profit and unprecedented levels of global and societal inequality. The new forms of capitalism, among which we focus on disaster capitalism and surveillance capitalism, alienate work and convert individuals into internet clicks to be sold to advertisers without respect for their privacy, personal integrity, the conditions of production of goods and services, and often for the rule of law.

To address these challenges, action researchers need to situate our practices clearly in the global neoliberal capitalist context. Neoliberalism is the most recent attempt to force the world to conform to the profoundly antisocial model of society as a collectivity of individuals guided entirely by selfish rational choice. Despite the inhumane beauty of the ideal rational choice model, putting it into practice yet again as Reagan and Thatcher tried, ran into lots of powerful opposition.

Their first step in trying to impose a free market (already a fundamental conceptual contradiction) was what is now called the "New Public Management" (Behn, 2001). This is a public management model based entirely on the "audit culture". It distrusts any and all institutions, and the integrity of individuals to behave appropriately unless held to account quantitatively for the economic consequences of their actions, and punished for failure to meet the goals set for them by the neoliberals. "New public management" is the instrumentalisation of the neoliberal model in transport, healthcare, education, social services, conservation, science, etc.

The second step is disaster capitalism. Even armed with the New Public Management, the neoliberals were not satisfied by their efforts at "freeing up" the market. So, Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys hit on taking advantage of major social disruptions to impose neoliberal discipline. Even this, however, did not produce the free-market utopia because even people as horrible as Augusto Pinochet recoiled at the harshness of the measures demanded by the Chicago Boys" (Klein, 2007).

Step three is surveillance capitalism. Rather than confronting the social forces "holding back" the free market head-on (because they continually failed to achieve their goals), the neoliberals have moved to surveillance capitalism. Here the imposition of neoliberal practices can be carried on mainly out of sight, without setting off reactions to stop the practices. Action researchers now have to understand that any AR project anywhere has to face such forces consciously and deal with them, not just by collaborative AR processes to help rebuild or re-create the integrity of the individual, but also by addressing the questions of power and contention for power directly.

The division of labour is extreme in this platform economy. Workers and many service organisations are suffering from a re-birth of Taylorism, particularly through globally de-centralised supply chains and worker precarity. Employees are isolated from each other and their coherence as individuals is undermined, as factories and other work organisations that

once could be treated as places where workers could talk, cooperate and organise work are more and more replaced by internet platforms, big data algorithms, and management by numbers, for the benefit of big investors rather than employees and customers. Accordingly social life and society have undergone a deep transformation: people are living their lives less as individuals and are being treated as bundles of wants and needs to be satisfied externally. The erosion of social norms and values that necessarily support a civic orientation or serve as a base for social engagement is clear. This undermines democratic institutions and democratic processes. Consciousness of living in a class structure is replaced by a sense of loss of control and a feeling of always being on the losing end of all transactions. This is an ideal hotbed for both radical rightwing and for Stalinist organising.

Unlike the neoliberal ideology that tried to make people believe that all individuals are autonomous rational actors, responsible for him/herself and his/her profit and individual success, the new forms of capitalism fracture even the rational individualist into an incoherent and apolitical array of wants and needs. In this context, action research, relying as it does on the integrity of the individual and the social fabric, is challenged to adapt and find new formulas to face these emerging forms of capitalism.

To explore the possibilities of developing new action research approaches, we first go back to the early concepts and merits of AR, and complement these with some current examples of positive outcomes emerging from processes where alternative paths are being explored. We then go more deeply into a few of these cases, most of them related to workplace and territorial development, to understand in more detail how they are being developed. We do this as a defence and development of action research. Based on previous AR frameworks and practical experiences, we take up three main issues to address how action research can support positive developments that rebuild democratisation of society (including the economy) under the conditions of contemporary capitalism. We articulate processes that go beyond single cases. The exposition begins with the ways some recent positive examples of AR show a capacity to address some of the worst trends in contemporary capitalism. In this context, we address the challenges the action research community faces in dealing with the enormous variety of AR practices, ideologies, and locations, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. We close with the relation between research and both local and global citizenship. We ask what the limits of our responsibilities and possibilities are, and what AR can do to strengthen individual and social resistance against neoliberal ideology, disaster capitalism, and surveillance capitalism.

The paper, and the writing process we have engaged in, are an example of how different streams of practices, ideologies and locations within AR can be bridged to build common ground in the face of radically anti-social forms of capitalism. By sharing our thoughts and experiences with the readers, we want to initiate a discussion forum in this journal and invite more contributors showing how diverse practices, ideologies and locations can continue developing this response to the current global crises.

## 2. Surveillance Capitalism's Impact on Society-Action Research in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism

The origins of Action Research (AR) reach back to Kurt Lewin's studies in the 1920s. Since those days, AR has compiled a great variety of experiences. Different concepts from systems thinking to intervention, PAR, democratic participation in local and regional development processes, and many others, have been developed and practiced in different socio-political contexts. AR engaged in experiments to promote industrial democracy, organisational development, and initiated community and regional development processes. Participative Action Research (PAR) included social reform as well as participatory rural development projects especially in Latin America and Africa (for details see section 4.2).

Action research was and is about values, including democratic participation, industrial democracy, and civic engagement in a vision of societies built on trust and reciprocity. AR now has experienced the rise of neo-liberalism, and is currently confronted with capitalism in its latest most powerful and anti-social forms: disaster and surveillance capitalism, which have led to an enduring sequence of eco-economic crises over the past decades.

Surveillance capitalism was invented by Google at the beginning of 21st century. Shoshana Zuboff formulated Google's basic principles of surveillance capitalism as a declaration of power: "We claim human experience as raw material free for the taking. On the basis of this claim we can ignore considerations of individuals' rights, interests, awareness or comprehension. On the basis of our claim we assert the right to take an individual's experience for translation into behavioural data". (Zuboff, 2019: 189) This means: surveillance capitalism started with Google's decision to expropriate and exploit all human experience, and to transform it into billions of data points, which are used as a resource to generate billions USD of profits by using algorithms to develop personalised advertisements. This is a strategy to manipulate consumer behaviour and to increase consumption in global capitalism′s growth machine. While disaster capitalism regarded Nature as a freely accessible resource to feed unlimited economic growth and to generate huge profits, surveillance capitalism appropriates the right to exploit human experience in work and life. Both expropriation and exploitation strategies caused, and are causing, disasters and immense costs, which the profiteering capitalists are unwilling to pay for. Resulting from these strategies are the enduring ecological crisis and the growing crisis of democracy worldwide. Karl Polanyi's vision of the dangerous consequences of misusing Nature and Labour (we now have to add human experience in this concept) as "fictitious commodities" is accomplished by surveillance and disaster capitalism. Essential to these types of capitalism is a reconstruction of the human individual as an atomised passive consumer. Pacifying the moral and political individual is a key move in the process decimating the social fabric, just as Polanyi predicted in 1944 (Polanyi, 2011) that it would be.

Capitalism in its contemporary forms manages to externalise the tremendous costs it causes; it makes individuals and society pay for the damage it does to Nature and Society as it pursues profit to exclusion of all else. In the case of surveillance capitalism, individuals are reduced to being data providers and to consumers, manipulated by algorithms fed with their own data. The self-conscious citizen with his/her desire and capacity to live a self-determined life, and to participate actively in the organisation of his work, is endangered and suppressed; people are alienated from their work and lives. With the exception of some minor examples

(see section 4.2) few are able to resist the expropriation and exploitation of his/her personal data. Shoshana Zuboff enumerates a great variety of strategies and products which Google uses for data extraction, such as smartphones, search engines, telematic instruments, and smart homes.

Surveillance capitalism uses algorithms as instruments to transform expropriated human experiences into forecast models of consumer behaviour, the raw material for developing targeted advertisement strategies. Via platforms, the "big data" concerns sell their targeted advertisement strategies to interested market partners, so-called users. Algorithms are the very heart of this strategy; they are based on complex mathematic calculations elaborated by small expert teams, whose results in the form of big data are treated as their corporate secrets. A recent exposé by a whistleblower who left Facebook with thousands of internal documents shows that this company is aware that rumours, negative emotions, and anger cause viewers to spend more time and clicks on particular sites. Despite the negative personal and social effects of which they are aware, they have opted to optimise their income rather than the welfare of their subscribers, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Lx5VmAdZSI). Given the immense impact of these algorithms on society and on individual consumer behaviour, their use should be subject to co-determination and democratic discussion. To organise the construction of algorithms as participative and democratic processes in cooperation with experts could well become a new field for action research in the future.[2]

The following example demonstrates how targeting advertising strategies functions: During his annual vacation a German priest is travelling to England. He is crossing the Channel by ship. Just before arriving at Dover, he receives a message on his smartphone, which informs him about the exact address of a London shop selling cassocks. This little story, one that really has happened, reveals Google's expropriation strategy: Google not only knows where a certain person is at a certain time, it is also informed about his destination (London), about his profession and probable interests. Moreover, we understand that Google collects data not only from the priests' information activities on Google's own platforms (services) e. g. Google maps for planning the route, but also from other businesses' platforms, e. g. a travel agency to book a place on the Channel ferry, a hotel room in London etc. (so called cross expropriation, Zuboff 2019). Moreover, Google extracts all these data not only without peoples' permission, but also by ignoring any legal rights, including even all other businesses' property rights, which is in fact remarkable: private property rights are the foundation on which prior capitalist societies and economies were built. Google has sufficient power to ignore these rights and to act according to its own rules, and to buy the politicians needed to protect their system (Zuboff, op. cit., 455–457).

This means we are living in a society of mass pseudo-individualism articulated by neoliberalism as the dominant ideology. Surveillance capitalism succeeds in expropriating citizens' civil rights as well as their capacities to participate in deliberative democracy and to live their lives according to their individual preferences. Surveillance capitalism thus attacks democracy at its very roots. The coexistence of capitalism and democracy comes to its end; Polanyi's chilling prophecy of emergent fascism becomes more and more real. The effects of surveillance capitalism for individuals both at work and in society are disastrous.

Work organisation via platforms and in global value creation chains causes a trend towards atomised work in which employers take little or no responsibility for employees,

2 We will come back to this actual Facebook case at the end of our paper.

communities, or the environment. As a result, the centrality of work as a source of social integration (Antonio Gramsci) is weakened. Atomised work can no longer shape the structure of society in the sense of establishing a social and moral order (Emile Durkheim 1992). To the contrary, the atomisation of work contributes to the destruction of existing social structures.

Action researchers must be aware of the present socio-economic situation, its multi-dimensional social, ecological and economic crises, as well as of its continuing transformation. Whether and how this awareness may lead AR to new horizons, methods and approaches is the question that guides this paper. We start this consideration with a brief review and appreciation of the early concepts and merits of action research.

## *3.* The early concepts and merits of AR – AR's origins in democracy and participation

In academia, AR had two strikes against it: it is driven by democratic civic values, and it believes that social science only learns by acting in context, not as a "spectator" activity. The academic social sciences were not just "taylorised" but also forced by powerful social and political interests to not to engage with social reform. The alternative to AR that developed was "applied social research", a conservative expert-consultant, low-academic status practice. As a result, AR ended up being developed largely outside academia, the Northern industrial variety at Tavistock and in Norway, and the Southern PAR variety in Catholic Action and social movements in Latin America, Africa, as well as in impoverished regions of the "North". AR work in all places proved that democratic social and work reform with stakeholder participation is not only possible but successful, as the work in Norway, the Antigonish Movement, and the Highlander Centre, Paolo Freire′s work in Brazil and beyond, and Fals Borda′s work in Colombian hinterlands show.

Given this, AR was not a successful academic movement, having been attacked by academic social researchers and having been nearly crushed by Reagan/Thatcher neo-liberalism. The social results of the failure of AR to influence the direction of history are clear: AR has not counteracted the worst levels of inequality and environmental destruction known to history, and emerging capitalisms so resolutely antisocial as disaster and surveillance capitalism. What can AR do under these conditions?

If we turn back to the key thinkers in the beginning of AR and revisit them with an eye to the future, we can see that Karl Polanyi, Eric Trist, Phillip Herbst, William Foote Whyte, Paolo Freire, and Orlando Fals Borda form a genealogy. Polanyi argued that labour is a fictitious commodity and that treating labour as separable from the social life of the laborer tears the social fabric. Tearing of the fabric causes counter-movements that can either move in a liberating direction or, more likely, toward fascism. Trist, Herbst, and Whyte took these ideas into the workplace in the aftermath of World War II and demonstrated through AR projects that a "joint optimisation" of efficiency, social solidarity, and safety in work was possible across class lines in a wide variety of organisations. Freire and Fals Borda took them into both national institutions and the hinterlands and favelas to promote democratic social movements.

## 4. Does AR have the tools to deal with such broad societal challenges?

### 4.1. Re-creating the citizen-actor

The current challenges to existing AR approaches of disaster and surveillance capitalism are profound. AR unquestionably was built on the premise of integral individuals with personal integrity as actors. Treating workers as stakeholders in industrial democracy, and treating landless peasants or oppressed rural black people as actors with important capabilities and rights, was axiomatic. Now disaster and surveillance capitalism challenge the very notion of the individual by atomising individuals into an infinite number of preferences, wants, and actions, each one facing a free market of its own in the face of global supply chains.

In AR, we have yet to come to terms with this decimation of labour into shards and the delocalisation of capitalist firms. Since AR cannot assume the integral individual as a point of departure, we have to develop strategies to support the re-development of the integral individual as a social and civic actor. This adds a dimension of complexity to AR, one that has been faced successfully in a few cases such as Belenky et al.′s brilliant Women′s Ways of Knowing (1997), Augusto Boal′s "theater of the oppressed" (2013) and a few others. Now the whole AR community has to take on these challenges if it is to survive.

### 4.2. Possible AR Strategies to integrate individuals in society

After presenting our perspective on the impact of surveillance capitalism and action research as a process to create positive outcomes, we now share more detailed descriptions of action research processes that we consider are helpful for the later discussion of how action research can be articulated to go beyond specific cases, towards movements that will gain scope to create alternative developments.

Radical, community-based action research builds on the work of generations of activists whose accomplishments "in the belly of the beast" continue. Starting with people like Jane Addams, the founder of the "settlement house" movement in Chicago and collaborator of John Dewey, these pro-social movements are a constant though certainly not recognised or supported by academic institutions. Some impressive examples follow:

The work of Patricia Maguire, beginning with her classic book on participatory feminism and followed by her collaborations with Mary Brydon-Miller and Alice MacIntyre, centres both on feminist liberation and education for oppressed native communities. See https://patriciamaguire.net/index.html

Mary Field Belenky and her collaborators working in the impoverished, uneducated rural and racially-oppressed regions of the US began with listening, then interacting, then creating communities in which oppressed rural women had voice and learned about their power. This work eventually resulted in significant support for the civil rights movement, for voter registration, and female activism. (See Women′s Ways of Knowing, 1997 and A Tradition that Has No Name, 1999).

The Highlander Research and Education Centre https://highlandercenter.org/ was founded by Myles Horton. It was and remains active in adult education to overcome the exploitation of Appalachia by predatory mining companies, civil rights, anti-racism, and community development. Highlander was first destroyed by the FBI, and more recently

burned down by opponents of civil rights. A narrative of its efforts is found in Myles Horton′s, The Long Haul (Horton, Kohl and Kohl, 1997). An example of the work of Highlander is given in John Gaventa′s, Power and Powerlessness (Gaventa, 1982) and the spoken book that Gaventa organised to capture the conversations between Myles Horton and Paolo Friere at Highlander, We Make the Road by Walking (Horton, Freire et al, 1990).

Many other examples in diverse subject areas exist from participatory municipal budgeting to client-driven architectural design. Projects like urban community development in vacant lots in the midst of low-income housing projects. An example is the "community gardens" movements, documented by Laura Saldívar-Tanaka (2002), which exist in many venues. Thohahoken Michael Doxtater, a Mohawk Iroquois educator, writer and filmmaker, teaches action research for the recovery and improvement of conditions of life for First Nations in Canada through what he calls "Indigenology" (Doxtater, 2001). He argues we are all indigenous to this planet, and must eat from the same dish. Through this, he argues for a renewed commitment to care for the earth.

These efforts take their place alongside the long history of action research by Marija Lisa Swantz, Budd Hall, Rajesh Tandon, L. David Brown, Robert Chambers, Paolo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Orlando Fals Borda, forming a tapestry of approaches to the difficult problems of colonialism, power/powerlessness, racism, sexism, inequality, and environmental damage.

What these practices reveal, in addition to the very different conditions under which AR is practiced in different parts of the world and under diverse political-economic and social conditions, is that AR is ultimately about changing power relationships. AR′s claims to enhance human flourishing, to create more "democratic" organisations, communities, or societies clearly have to go well beyond providing conditions under which the local stakeholders are able to participate and have an impact on their own conditions. AR is about power-sharing and mutual respect in any and all cases. To pretend that it is just about improving internal organisational processes, or about redressing inequalities in the distribution of resources or about improving the environmental sustainability of human arrangements, is to reduce its meaning and democratic ambitions. AR ultimately exists to enhance the capacity of everyone to play a significant role in determining the conditions of their own lives. Unless we take on this broader challenge, disaster and surveillance capitalism will continue to be hegemonic.

## 5. Examples of AR strategies to meet the challenges preceding surveillance capitalism

In this section, we share what we have called "positive deviants" in the efforts to face challenges that we consider are part of the trends that today lead our social and economic systems towards extremely destructive forms of capitalism. "Positive deviants" (Shekar, 1990) is a statistical concept that refers to cases on a normal curve that are a number of standard deviations from the mean, but in a desirable direction. This refers to exceptionally positive cases that appear under generally unfavourable conditions.

AR has focused on such cases repeatedly throughout its history: successful participatory and democratic enterprises in Norway, Mondragón, successful AR civil rights initiatives in the US Southern states, overcoming mining companies in Appalachia, overcoming exploitative electric companies in the Colombian hinterland, and many others.

AR knows that these are not exceptions to some self-serving capitalist universal rule. They are successful examples that work in current environments, to the benefit of people who otherwise are exploited and oppressed by a rapacious and destructive system of power and inequality. They may be positive deviants, but they are possible, and no one can argue that more like them are not possible or necessary. Positive deviants do not occur in isolation, one case at a time. For them to come into being and to persist requires a surrounding environment and set of value commitments that provide resources to stabilise and support these efforts. As Davydd Greenwood′s late colleague at Cornell University, Alan McAdams quipped "If it is happening somewhere, it must be possible."

AR must also rise intellectually to challenge the self-serving "orthodoxy" that claims that positive deviants are "exceptions" and that because they are exceptions, they can be ignored. Such cases may be statistically exceptional, but they demonstrate that a much better and more humane system of socio-political-economic relations is possible, but only if the avarice of current powerholders and monopolists can be confronted and brought under democratic control. For that to happen, strategies often associated with AR in the Global South, and in the civil rights and race struggles in the US and in South Africa, have to be brought into play as well.

These are a few examples of "positive deviants":

Norwegian Socio-technical Systems Design:
Emerging initially from Einar Thorsrud′s willingness and ability to test the ideas in practice, the concepts of socio-technical systems design were put into practice in Norway, initially in an experimental ship-manning project. The ship in question was an oil tanker, and it was built to embody the principles of socio-technical systems design including joint optimisation of the relationship between work organisation and technology, to enhance safety and quality of life onboard, and to minimise status differences among the different levels of the organisation.

For this to be implemented required an agreement between the government, the unions, and the employer federation. This kind of agreement became a model for future collaborations called thereafter the "social partners". This partnership exists to this day and is now written into law. It does not mean that every company takes advantage of it and produces a participatory workplace, but those that want to do this find ample levers in the national system to be able to proceed. (Ravn and Øyum, 2020).

"Action and Research Programme for the Humanization of Working Life":
The German "Action and Research Programme for the Humanisation of Working Life" (HdA) was an experiment to introduce democratic participation processes in working life: The HdA programme was part of the social-democratic inspired social change movement in the early 1970s. Similar to the Norwegian programme on "Industrial democracy", it was supported by a reform coalition of employer's associations, trade unions and the state. However, differently from the Norwegian experiences, the German reform coalition was only temporary; it was broken up five years after its start by the employer association, because they feared democratisation processes moving beyond the co-determining institutions: "No expansion of co-

determination" was their slogan (Fricke 2004). The programme continued, but its character was changed: democratic experiments were no longer possible. Nevertheless, the temporary existence of the reform coalition enabled a group of five experimental projects to demonstrate that industrial democracy, i. e., introducing democratic participation as a path to economic democracy, was and is possible, if supported by social reform coalitions.

The most radical experiment was the AR project "Participation and Qualification". Forty-seven so called "unskilled" workers, male and female, migrants and Germans, working in a screw factory cooperated with five action researchers for four years. In processes of joint reflection and action, they demonstrated that workers are interested in, and capable of engaging in participative action research processes resulting in better working conditions (a moderate wage increase, better and safer work), and reducing the Tayloristic division of work. The distribution of power was slightly changed between workers, lower management, and experts and the workers learned to have a voice in dialogues and change processes.

Public spaces for reflection and dialogue (Pålshaugen 2002) were introduced after negotiations with local top management and works council. Democratic participation was practiced for another three years after the end of the project, and after the researchers had left it. The screw factory was later sold to another company. Although democratic participation was practiced only for seven years, this experiment should not be regarded a failure. Like many other social experiments in history, it contributes to the experience and expectations in societies that economic democracy can be realized step-by-step. The moving force in this historical process is the immense creativity of the workforce and their skills and experiences. On a small scale this force became visible during the participation process.

For example, fifteen years before their trade union accepted and implemented it generally, the workers designed a new wage system as an alternative to piecework wages. From this perspective all social experiments guided by the vision of industrial democracy are important, because they confirm the human expectation of a future society built by associations of self-determining citizens.

The Mondragón labour-managed cooperative system:
This is one of the largest and most successful systems of worker cooperatives in the world. It calls itself an "ecosystem". In addition to the individual structures of the co-operatives, already well described in the literature, the system includes overarching general statutes that all co-operatives must follow, a General Assembly, a bank, and a co-operative healthcare and retirement system. There are producer co-operatives, sales co-operatives, research and development co-operatives, consulting co-operatives, and a co-operative university in the system. When an individual co-operative faces a challenge, there is an option for "inter-co-operation" meaning either financial help, accepting workers idled by a downturn, or both. Within such an ecosystem, the development of new co-operatives or the restructuring of a co-operative is facilitated by the surrounding structures. It is no guarantee of the survival of an individual co-operative, and some major ones have failed or have converted to private businesses, but it creates a context in which success is possible (Imaz and Eizaguire, 2020; Whyte and Whyte, 1991).

Territorial development in Rafaela, Argentina:
The city of Rafaela, in the Province of Santa Fe, constitutes an interesting experience of territorial economic development in Argentina, characterised by a high degree of economic-

productive dynamism that is based, in part, on the response capacity generated at the local level. It is a territory with an SME network that has positioned itself efficiently not only in the domestic market but also in foreign markets. It works in conjunction with a strong local state and a social and educational environment with diverse characteristics. One of these characteristics is the continued dialogue between economic actors, many of whom have conflicting perspectives on development. This has enabled distinctive employment strategies in the face of the economic crises that Argentina has gone through. It is not a territory without problems, but it is a territory in which there is a greater capacity to work together to solve problems. That capacity is not the result of markets: it is the product of a process of social and political construction, especially after the nineties of the last century.

Action Research for Territorial Development:

Another example of a positive deviant is Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) practiced by Orkestra- The Basque Institute of Competitiveness in the Basque Autonomous Community of Spain. In Gipuzkoa, one of the three provinces of the autonomous community, action research has helped generate the spaces where territorial development has been discussed as a process to counteract progressive individualism and the weakening of historic forms of community development in the face of increasingly radical versions of globalisation. This has resulted in some small transformations in specific policy processes.

The rationale of ARTD as practiced in Gipuzkoa is threefold: (a) the development of collective capabilities by a territory can increase its capacity to face global trends; (b) politics and policy can be vehicles to develop such collective capabilities and (c) action research can be the methodology to construct collective capabilities through politics and policy. Territory can thus be a subject to counteract global trends by strengthening territorial (local, regional) identities and spaces for socioeconomic development. Territory in the context of ARTD is "the actors who live in a place with their social, economic and political organisation, their culture and institutions, as well as the physical environment they are part of".

The aim of the definition was to discard interpretations of territory as a physical container, and underline the agency of the inhabitants in each place. Territorial development was then defined as "the process of mobilisation and participation of different actors (public and private) in which they discuss and agree on the strategies that can guide individual as well as collective behaviour". These definitions aim at inspiring processes where local and regional communities can maximise their capacity to decide their own socio-economic future. To do so and combined with deliberative policy analysis (Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018; Griggs, Norval, and Wagenaar, eds, 2014), ARTD has been described as exercising soft resistance in policy and politics (Arrona and Larrea, 2018) while developing action research in contexts of conflict (Larrea and Arrona, 2019).

One of the core features of ARTD, despite the diversity of positions of politicians and policy makers participating, is that the main parties in the territory agreed on the need to explore new patterns of relationship of the government with territorial actors, with more participatory and community-oriented economic models in mind. The main issue in achieving this is one of legitimacy. Which actors a government decides to mobilise, and with whom they decide to participate to discuss and agree on the strategies for the territory is a deeply controversial and ideological decision. This means that the agreement to create framework programmes and explore alternative approaches, despite the differences and conflicting positions on the specific paths to be explored, is a challenge that cannot be underestimated. This

agreement has been the basic condition for action research to develop uninterruptedly in policy processes for more than a decade.

One of the main examples of this basic agreement to continue exploring new patterns of relationship of the government with territorial actors is a thinktank initiated in 2020. The following is the rationale that inspires its activity: "The main features of the predominant political culture can be synthesised into two fundamental ideas: political disaffection and the lack of capability of public structures to respond to the economic, social and political challenges of globalisation" "We live in an increasingly individualistic society where the dimensions of communitarian and public life lose relevance". "The lack of democratic control over a relevant part of the economic system, and the lack of institutions that could counteract the new realities generated by globalisation, are creating a crisis of representation in our institutional system".[3]

The question that now emerges is how AR processes conducted in a small territory like Gipuzkoa can affect trends such as surveillance capitalism, ARTD focuses on transforming the existing situations, not by providing alternative discourses, but by transforming ingrained habits of policymakers. These habits can, in a process, generate small transformations in policy that, like a cascade, further transform politics, policy and territorial development. One of the lessons learned by action researchers in this context is that the process was initially discouraging, as they went through a transition from the "big words" of politicians to the "small transformation of ingrained habits". But they learned that persistence could eventually result in important tangible results.

## 6. Discussion

What does all this mean for Action Research, and what can AR do to strengthen individual and social resistance against surveillance capitalism?

### 6.1. What does all this mean for Action Research?

Roughly speaking one can distinguish two fields of AR activities among the examples we have provided: Action research in working life and organisations, and AR for Territorial Development (ARTD, see section 5). Both are guided by visions: democratisation of work or industrial democracy and democratic organisation of community/regional development. Both approaches are more or less limited in time and space: especially, despite networking efforts, most work-related AR projects have ended up being single case approaches. Until now, action researchers have not succeeded in organising sustainable, continuing change processes in working life[4]

In their final research report, Emery and Thorsrud complained about the Norwegian Trade Unions who refused to organize a nationwide process of democratisation in working life:

3 Source: Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank, Deliberation Group for a New Political Culture, working document nº1.

4 This seems to be more likely within community or regional development processes. Emery and Thorsrud's industrial democracy programme in Norway as well as Gustavsen's LOM programme in Sweden are prominent examples of the difficulty in initiating continuous change processes through work-related action research.

instead the interests of these actors concentrated on health and safety in work issues (Emery, Thorsrud 1982). A similar fate occurred to Gustavsen's LOM programme (Leadership, Organisation, *Medbestämmande*), which was centred around the concept of democratic dialogue. In contrast to the institutional approach of the Norwegian programme, the LOM was process-oriented: the idea was to practice democratisation by continuing democratic dialogues between employees and management within a firm or among several participating enterprises. Gustavsen developed the Swedish process approach because he was interested in initiating ongoing change processes leading to a democratic social movement. In this respect he also failed.

Both Scandinavian programmes however resulted in a series of very impressive examples of industrial democracy regarding democratic participation processes. Despite their limitations in time and space, these examples are important, because they demonstrate future possibilities (Widerschein des Morgen, Bloch 1960: I, 151; Möglichkeitsanalyse, Fricke and Fricke 1977: 99; 104) to practice democracy in working life and economy as an alternative to the actually prevailing hierarchical and profit-oriented work organisation.

Moreover, both Scandinavian programmes were based on social partnership models. Social partnership however turned out to be limited; all attempts to introduce processes or institutions of industrial democracy were stopped as soon as they exceeded the scope of a single enterprise, a small cluster, or: in the Swedish case, clusters of enterprises in a special region (Qvale 2008). Despite its limitations social partnership had positive outcomes: both programmes practiced joint optimisation of efficiency, safety in work, quality of work with the perspective of creating social solidarity. At first glance this joint optimisation strategy was very successful: As usual, efficiency increased considerably alongside with increased participation, and so did safety in work and, to a certain extent, also quality of work.

Why then did all attempts to introduce an industry-wide process of democratisation and democratic participation fail? Our thesis is that because of participation and democratszing processes, employees' demands for democratic participation as well as on a fair share from greater efficiency and growth exceeded the social partners' expectations and wishes. Trade unions as well as, though for different reasons, employers and management remained reluctant to accept open processes of democratic participation, because they never knew where such processes might end someday and feared losing their own power in the system.

The actual concentration of income in all societies around the world demonstrates that capital is not interested in fair income distribution. It denies the fair distribution of the results of efficiency growth and rising work productivity by, for example, fair wages, reduction of working time, accepting trade union demands to introduce a four-day-working week, etc. German employers' associations were even more restrictive. They stopped experiments in practicing democratic participation in selected enterprises, financed by the state program "Humanisation of Working Life" only five years after the programme had started. Their argument was: "No expansion of co-determination financed by public funds."

As a counter strategy against increasing demands for democratisation processes, capitalists introduced new management concepts as of the 1990as, which replaced, simply speaking, the existing command and control work organisation with methods of "indirect steering and control". This new management concept grants the employees limited spaces of self-regulation at work, while the conditions of work such as time budget, personal and financial equipment are excluded from any kind of participatory decisions. When these concepts are applied, resulting from the usual cost cutting strategies, work intensity and stress

increase to a point where the quality of work cannot be guaranteed anymore by the employees (see especially healthcare working conditions in hospitals as well as in ambulatory scenarios). Consequently, employees are alienated from their work. They can no longer identify themselves with their work, there is no possibility left to be proud and satisfied with good work quality and useful products.

We could learn from past experiences, and the positive deviant cases we have presented, to reflect on how the action research community might now react in the face of surveillance capitalism.

## 6.2. What can AR do to strengthen individual and social resistance against surveillance capitalism?

All capitalist strategies to intensify work, to resist democratisation demands, to constantly generate unequal income distribution, and to increase the social difference between rich and poor weaken the citizens' capacities and desires to lead a satisfying personal and social life. They result in the loss of the ability of workers to influence the conditions of their work. In addition, the exploitation and expropriation strategies of surveillance capitalism reduce the citizens to data providers and manipulated consumers, who function to maintain the constant growth of capitalism. The environmental destruction these systems generate is amply documented.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that human capacities to live a self-determined life, to practice democratic participation in working life and society have not been destroyed. They certainly have been suppressed, hidden under experiences of defeat, social isolation and lack of voice at work and in society, but they will survive as an essential human characteristic (Fricke 1983). It is action research's first and most important task to revitalise these innovative capabilities, and to recreate the citizen-actor. To this end, many participative strategies have been developed by AR in the past.

To generate the energy necessary to recreate the citizen-actor in the era of surveillance capitalism, inspiring visions of an alternative society are needed as well as a reaffirmation of the non-negotiable value of democracy itself. Action research has always worked with collaborative moral and political worldviews, such as industrial democracy, democratic participation, autonomy at work, participatory and community oriented economic models

In this context, we want to draw attention to Marcel Mauss' vision of a "society of gift" (Mauss 1924/1975) built on peoples' trust and reciprocity, their common decency. There is empirical evidence that peoples' common decency, as well as their innovative qualifications may survive the destructive effects of surveillance capitalism. According to Marcel Mauss, peoples' common decency and the economy of the gift are the bases on which our societies are built. Mauss was aware of the risk we are witnessing today, that contemporary social relations will increasingly follow the model of exchange and contract, precisely as has happened. AR has to intensify its efforts to stop this development and to demonstrate by experiments that alternatives are possible.

If this all sounds like a "pipe dream", one only has to read the books of Hiro Miyazaki, The Method of Hope and Arbitraging Japan and Anna Tsing′s The Mushroom at the End of the World to know that complex webs of reciprocities, mutual care, and unexpected solidarities occur in places where they are least expected. Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg have

published a compendium of such examples in their The Economy of Hope. (See Miyazaki, 2004; Miyazaki, 2013; Miyazaki, 2014; Miyazaki and Swedberg, 2017; Tsing, 2015).

Another problem is AR's understanding and relationship to power in all its different aspects as social, economic, and personal power. In every project or programme, action research is confronted with one or another kind of power: social partnership, a basic element of the Scandinavian AR programmes is characterised by the unequal distribution of power between the different partners: indeed, this was the main cause for the programmes′ failure to initiate social movements for industrial democracy in Norway or Sweden. Gustavsen's democratic dialogue may be understood as an exercise for employees to strengthen their self-consciousness in dialogues with management. But none of the Scandinavian programmes/ projects succeeded in mobilising the necessary power resources for its broader purposes. There was always a distance between action researchers and structural or personal power, a distance ranging from hostility to fear of getting *mani pulite.*

The Basque experience showed this connection to power too. In the Freirean perspective, which inspires it, it is not only a matter of conquering power or sharing it as something that one owns. It means rehearsing alternative ways of exercising power in the process of knowledge production in the direction of more democracy, fairness, and sustainability. To better understand power in these contexts, we use some contributions by Paulo Freire, who in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972), identified humanisation as being in those times an "inescapable concern". Since the writing of the book at the end of the 1960 s, this concern has not vanished. It has nevertheless taken on different forms given the dynamics of history. This, in turn, requires recreating ways of reading and transforming reality.

Considering history as a process open to human agency, policy and politics are indispensable tools for promoting change within a given territory. AR has an important role in enabling subjects and their associations and networks to speak their truth, which for Freire is always word-in-action. This means, among other things, becoming aware of one's own immersion within a given culture and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Still, according to Paulo Freire, the oppressor is not just "out there" with the "other". Also, the oppressed and those who stand and struggle on their side host features of the oppressor that need to be overcome through emancipatory, critical, and solidary praxis, a process that combines action and reflection dialectically.

From this perspective, action research is necessarily a political endeavour, as recognised in the narrative of ARTD. There are ethical-political options to be chosen from the definition of the problem to the way and to whom the results are communicated. While being inherently political, research inevitably must deal with the issue of power. Besides, when someone speaks to power, there needs to be someone that listens too. ARTD shows how action research can be conducted with those in power as stakeholders, offering, at the same time, resistance and a helping hand and generating the conditions where power listens. Learning in this case is intertwined with a continuous process of negotiation.

Regarding the present social situation, the time has come for AR to reflect and to change its relation to power. Throughout the 100-year history of action research, capitalism has tolerated action research concepts and practices if they were restricted to single cases or temporary action research programmes. These restrictions can no longer be accepted, because they prevent AR from becoming a relevant opponent to extreme forms of neoliberal capitalism. The only way to overcome our present political and social irrelevance would be for action researchers in different streams of practice, ideologies and locations within AR to come

together (see, as an example, the AR+ initiative led by Hilary Bradbury) and to look for allies. These might include social movements like Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter, Not One More and, under certain conditions, trade unions and/or communities or regional authorities (see section 5) involving the cession of political power to citizens in communities and territories).

We will also have to analyse the experiences from more radical social reform projects led by Orlando Fals Borda, Paulo Freire and others. Of great interest is also a current trend in Colombia where social movements leading an alliance with academic and non-academic research groups and networks including AR are centres of research processes. (Carrillo 2020, p. 36) Carrillo reports that "social mobilisation keeps growing and widening its motivations: alongside of traditional civil rights, working class and rural claims, new topics [emerge] like the defense of traditional territories and ecosystems against transnational extractivism, the claim of a dialogued end of the civil war in Colombia and the requirement of protection for social leaders being systematically killed." These topics indicate that AR is increasingly confronting and engaged with political and power issues by its co-operation with current socio-political movements such as in Colombia.

Recreating the citizen-actor; activating his/her innovative qualifications; orienting the daily research work towards a vision; trying to promote industrial democracy and democratic participation; enabling territories to act as a collective subject, to maximise their capacity to decide on their own socio- economic future, and to become spaces to counteract global trends; rethinking the relation to socio-political power: these are the big challenges for AR to become a relevant opponent to neoliberal capitalism by protecting societies and individuals of its disastrous consequences and making the technology work for people rather than working on them.

This sounds very general and utopian. We do think that such perspectives are necessary to guide action research. But there are also opportunities and possibilities to undertake concrete activities and first steps as an action researcher, or call them social experiments, to approach a desired future. The actual turbulences around Facebook open a window of opportunities for such AR activities:

An exposé by whistleblower Frances Haugen, mentioned briefly earlier, a former employee of Facebook who left the company with thousands of internal documents, presents another challenge for action researchers to consider. The documents she took show that the company is aware that rumours, negative emotions, anger, and conspiracy theories cause viewers to spend more time and clicks on particular sites, making those clicks more valuable to advertisers and thus more profitable to the company. According to Facebook′s own research, they know these dynamics are destructive for many individuals and are socially polarising. But despite these negative personal and social effects, they are opting to optimise their income rather than the welfare of their subscribers, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Lx5VmAdZSI). In her interview with CBS News, Haugen encouraged federal regulation of Facebook to prevent them from doing this (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-60-minutes-polarizing-divisive-content/). Importantly, she reported that employees from the "civic integrity department" within Facebook changed an algorithm to reduce the publication of hate speech but that another department foiled this intervention.

The implications for AR are considerable because Haugen asserts that not all employees of Facebook accept the current corporate practices. Rather than opposing or trying to shut

Facebook down, action researchers could work to surface the diversity of positions among the employees of the company, and make it necessary for different categories of stakeholders to explain their positions and actions in public forums. If these diverse viewpoints were brought to the surface skilfully, a result could be using public pressure to shift the balance toward the redesign of the algorithms to lessen the harms they cause. Alternatively, AR could support both citizen and insider initiatives to define which federal regulations are really necessary to achieve such a goal. Or action researchers could help citizens find/develop ways to resist the reach of these so-called "social media" giants in their lives.

From the perspective of AR, the immense impact of these algorithms on society, and on individual consumer behaviour, means that their use should be subject to co-determination and democratic discussion. To organise the construction of algorithms as participative and democratic processes in co-operation with experts could well become a new field for action research in the future.

## Dialogue Forum "Future Perspectives of Action Research"

It is our intention to stimulate a discussion about the questions raised. Regarding the actual and historical strengths and weaknesses of Action Research on one side and the social and economic changes that have occurred since the times of Kurt Lewin and Karl Polanyi, which continuously take place with growing speed and intensity on the other, we think the time has come to reflect on whether and how Action Research can meet the challenges of the more and more aggressive and destructive forms of modern capitalism, which have been developed under the umbrella of neo-liberalism.

It is interesting to trace the upswing of neo-liberal forms of capitalism back to some initiatives right after the end of World War II. In 1946 a group of prominent European and US American economists and philosophers met in Switzerland and founded the Mont Pelerin Society; its purpose was the promotion of neo-liberalism in "Western" economy and society and later worldwide. Participants were among others Friedrich A. Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Karl Popper, Milton Friedman. Although the foundation of the group and its existence were hardly noticed by the public, its activities became highly influential. In cooperation with the Chicago School (Milton Friedman and his Chicago Boys) they designed the principles of a "free" competitive and global market economy, based on private property rights, competition and disembedded from social or state regulations. One may say that together with the Chicago School, the Mont Pelerin Society marks the origin of neoliberal economic and social practice, unleashing modern capitalism.

We cannot make these authors directly responsible for the emergence of neoliberal politics and economy with their disastrous practices over the past 75 years. Still their ideas attracted powerful political and economic actors like Reagan and Thatcher plus Big Data, financial capital and speculation which created and enforced socio-economic processes, resulting in worldwide practices of disastrous and surveillance capitalism as mentioned above.

In contrast we insist in action researchers' responsibility to foster and to build on the integrity and common decency of the individual, to enable active citizens to self-determination at work and to create democratic societies. Action research is about democratic and

participative values, which are the essence of its social responsibility very much in contrast to that of neoliberal scholars.

We have demonstrated in our text that AR has been very successful, in innumerable AR research initiatives, in applying its values in co-operation with a great variety of practitioners and practitioner organisations. What is missing so far are powerful social and political actors who are able to make AR values guide social practice beyond a series of single cases or projects limited in time and space. The crucial question is how AR may reach social impact beyond these limitations. One way may be coalitions between action research and social movements in different forms: Action Research creating social movements, as the late Björn Gustavsen, one of the founders of this journal, tried to establish: "The idea is not to replace the single case with a number of cases but to create or support social movements" (Gustavsen 2003: 95). Another option is action research organised by social movements (Carrillo 2020). A third possibility may be to engage in co-operation between AR and social movements such as Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter etc.

We want to stimulate a dialogue among action researchers on these issues, visions and research practices, and on how to enable Action Research to contribute to or create social movements against the destructive tendencies of modern capitalism. For this purpose we will establish, starting with issue 1/2022, a dialogue forum on future perspectives of AR as part of the International Journal of Action Research. Any ideas based on your experiences will be welcome as part of an open dialogue.

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