

Discussion paper: When the Cinderellas unite¹

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In the practice of action research, it is important to get things right with a good analysis of reality. Tools such as sociograms (Ganuza, 2010) allow us to define the formal and informal spaces that underlie a problem, the capitals of the actors involved, their level of access or exclusion from power, and the density or absence of their relationships. From a global perspective, at the beginning of the text that heads this section, Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea and Streck (2022) focus on delimiting the position of individuals in the sociogram of our societies, which are marked by the neoliberal revolution, disaster capitalism and vigilance: the raw material with which AR works (citizens) is a broken individual, adrift, “incoherent and apolitical in their desires and needs” (2022: 10).

This crude definition is not unknown to those of us who work with local communities, and it can be seen as the result of two complementary processes. On the one hand, the breakdown of community networks, resulting from material changes that promote the importance of the self in our societies. Needless to say, this argument has been exacerbated by undermining caused by the neoliberal individualist ideology. On the other hand, since 2008 the erosion of community networks has had the rupture of the individual added to it. The accelerated context of uncertainty and objective or subjective precariousness in which we are immersed, aggravated by Covid, has dashed the hopes of thousands of people who cannot find comfort in an “outside” marked by the weakening of community and identity networks. Thus, if we look at the analysis of reality, we must be aware that we work in cracked territories, in a barren land where community ties have been broken, and dozens of broken dolls survive adrift on the currents (Mirowski, 2009).

Perhaps for this reason, in my practical work energising local communities with Participatory Action Research processes, the metaphor of Cinderella emerges strongly. This symbol embodies those sectors I work with to change the sociogram of reality and access new forms of power. Ultimately, I understand that we work with (and like) Cinderellas, seeking to change the story of their (our) lives. Deep down, I believe that the objective of AR is none other than to change the story, as a metaphor for a change in reality needed by vulnerable people more accustomed to scrubbing floors (like Cinderella), than dancing in luxurious salons (like stepmothers).

In my two decades of research and community participatory action, when I go out into the neighbourhood, I detect a growing isolation of people increasingly traversed by not only objective, but increasingly subjective vulnerabilities and exclusions. Asking oneself, as Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea and Streck propose, about the role that action research should play in these times means, in my opinion, accepting that in the face of the utopian dimension of modernity, the victory of neoliberalism is increasingly diagnosed by people in a depoliticised way (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Mirowski, 2013). It is increasingly difficult for people to understand that their situation of vulnerability, marked by an inability to pay their mortgage, take care of their dependent children, get papers, or find affordable housing is not down to their bad

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luck. Moreover, it is even more difficult for them to see that their situation corresponds to the interests of stepmothers and stepsisters, who, like the interest groups that structure disaster and surveillance capitalism, compete fiercely with each other, but collaborate to subdue the Cinderellas and prevent them from accessing the prince. Now more than ever, the Cinderellas of our country seem convinced that their destiny is to scrub floors... unless magic appears, or rage in the form of homeopathic substitutes that do not cure but offer fake security.

Homeopathy does not mix well with AR, but magic does. In PAR, the reason for developing a sociogram is to not only recognise *what is* in society at the time of the intervention, showing the relationships between powerful and subordinate in the community, between formal and informal groups. The aim is not to draw pictures to understand reality, but to change it. In the PAR, the sociogram of the real, as with our transforming, utopian intentions, is followed by the sociogram of the ideal, which points towards what *ought to be*, as the first step to explore how and with whom to achieve it. As stressed by the authors of the text we are discussing, “AR exists to enhance each person’s ability to play a significant role in determining the conditions of their own lives” (Fricke, Greenwood, Lawea & Streck, 2022: 15). This role is never, under any circumstances, to assume that a person’s highest aspiration was scrubbing floors.

Therefore, if our practice could be exemplified by this tale, our goal would be for Cinderella to throw off the yoke of those who condemn her to prostration, allowing her to rise up to recreate new forms of power. This fits in with AR, because as the authors recall, to specify its political vocation, it “must address the question of power” in a continuous process of negotiation. In our metaphor, Cinderella would dance with the prince (who could be a princess, or even a frog), perhaps, to create a new public body of citizen actors. In fact, the text we draw on is a clear example of the various types of dances with power via which AR has got Cinderellas involved over many decades: some shorter, others more intense, some with abrupt ends and others that are still going on.

However, we have not dealt with the key to the story, its perverse essence. For the story to have a happy ending, Cinderella must wait for the magic to work. However, in these liquid societies, as Bauman (2010) comments, the magic is in a person’s luck: it is in that kind of big bang that allows some people to go from an anodyne, if not vulnerable life, to success (whether affective, economic, academic, material or subjective). This success, like musical chairs, is the kind where only one person wins: the fastest, the strongest. Thus, the game of life, in a good fight with neoliberal dystopia, becomes a kind of unbridled dance for survival in which only one person is left dancing at the end... on the wreckage of the rest. To be able to participate in this cruel game, one must first teach people to accept the rules, that “there is no alternative”, whether *XFactor*, *Hunger Games*, or *Squid Game*. Here, the ontology defined by neoliberalism and based on a concept that naturalises egoism is key (Ahedo, 2021; Bollier & Hellfrich, 2019): the person only survives by competing and, in addition, must be attentive, must be responsible, must do whatever it takes to not miss the train that can change their life (Friedrich, 2018), because there will be no more opportunities. Thus, if someone does not take advantage when the train (magic) passes their station, they will be responsible for remaining vulnerable, so it only remains to wait for luck or grab it. End of story. Sweet dreams. For whoever can sleep.

However, from an AR point of view, there are two certainties. First, there is no magic out there: no fairy godmothers, no pumpkins or mice. Second, there is work, effort, intelligence, determination for people to become agents, actors, owners of their lives. That is the magic of

society. AR knows that reality does not magically change; it emerges from difficulty, vulnerability and injustice and raises a utopian horizon that moves away from idealism to the problems of reality. Therefore, the reference text is a wake-up call, a self-critical invitation to adapt to times when AR is more necessary than ever, an invitation for the centrality of the practice to regain its political character. We would say that the magic of AR, the central vector that will allow the story of our lives to change, is to recover the deep meaning of the political sphere.

As the authors point out, the reconstruction of the citizen-actor must be the first of AR's tasks, since it is not possible to build a community structure on disconnected, isolated broken dolls. However, practical AR must be aware of context. The current context is defined by a process of depoliticisation that subverts the sense of modernity, creating the conditions of possibility for the neoliberal dystopia to take hold. As the authors recall, current capitalism, which calls democracy itself into question, anchors its roots in the project designed in 1947 by Hayek in *Mont Pelerin*. Neoliberalism is associated with the breakdown of the public from two perspectives: the material, characterised by cuts in social services and the ideological, defined by rabid individualism. The problem is that, in addition, neoliberalism (also) is a government art, displaying governmentality in which the political is no longer valued for its ability to structure the common good, but based on a rationality measured in terms of effectiveness, profitability, efficiency and impact in accordance with the New Public Management mandates. Thus, this new rationale (Dardot & Laval, 2013) focuses on guaranteeing the progress of the economy measured in real time in indicators of efficiency, effectiveness, and cost/benefit. Meanwhile, the management of life is subordinated to citizenship, which is made responsible for finding solutions. Politics is therefore stripped of any public responsibility towards the collective that may have nothing to do with the management of the market. Politics, the management of the common sphere, is privatised, with calls for individual citizen responsibility that are not accompanied by political co-responsibility and the activation of collective structuring mechanisms. This means inverting the logic of advancement in which modernity has settled. If modernity was the transition from private to public, the neoliberal revolution privatises and displaces the sense of the political from the individual.

However, we must emphasise that in its deepest dimension, which fits in with the epistemology of AR, the political emerges out of the transition from the private consideration of a problem to the assumption that its root is public; therefore it must be managed collectively to guarantee outlets for those who lack particular resources to face a vulnerability that is not the result of chance, but of inequality. Politics, seen as the collective search for public and community instruments to manage problems previously considered private, arises from our own contradictory nature of human beings with unlimited aspirations and scarce resources.

A privileged mind endowed with illusions in a fragile body and a finite world explains the ability of humans to evolve from collaboration, co-ordination and empathy. This has allowed complex scarcity management systems to emerge in our species, to standardise behaviours, to regulate behaviours, preventing the human being from governed by the law of the jungle (Damasio, 2010). Thus, politics is “the art of making the impossible possible” because its essence is to resolve the contradiction between unlimited desires and limited resources, precipitating the collective search for solutions to problems, previously considered private, that have their origins in public roots. Revealing the structural meaning of inequalities allows people to stop considering that their situation is explained by chance, guilt or bad luck. The visibility of vulnerability as a reality that, far from being private, affects thousands of people,

allows the awareness of the need for public responses to emerge which come together into mandatory regulations. Ultimately, the magic of the Cinderella story is in the fact that she looks up from the ground and sees that she is not alone; there are thousands, millions of Cinderellas who privately perceive themselves as condemned to scrubbing floors.

This is for me the keystone of Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea and Streck's text, as they call for the recreation of integral individuals endowed with agency, in search of a change in power relationships as a nodal point of the various traditions of Action Research. As in Cinderella, the key to the story that inspires a sense of AR for me is that whoever believed themselves condemned to scrub floors in isolation, can stop being a broken doll without agency, and rise up and assume that self-awareness that prompted Borda and Freire to aspire to new forms of power, and even to the public sphere. To do this, we have resources: a pumpkin turned into a chest of tools, techniques, instruments in constant renewal and experimentation: magazines such as the *International Journal of Action Research* or *Action Research Journal*, bedside books, anthologies, web resources, even cookery books such as *Cooking with Action Research: Stories and Resources for Self and Community Transformations*. They offer a wealth of resources to weave Cinderellas, to empower, deliberate and reflect, adapting our practice to the knowledge, cultures and plural positions of rich and complex societies, which we must structure in search of a collective meaning. A pumpkin thrown by some wise mice that treasure the memory of the victories and defeats that the authors identify in their text, exemplifying the permanent test in the search for alternative forms of power that underlie AR in Norway, the Basque Country, Latin America, in the workplace and in all lands.

Consequently, the first of the challenges that AR must face is to recover the political sense of community action. Now, if we look at the reality, we could suggest some parallel aspects to reconsider.

- If politics needs a demos, we must start from the premise that the current context is defined by an individualistic logic characterised by the art of neoliberal (self) government. Precisely for this reason, the politicisation of Cinderellas is not enough; strategies that seek community articulation must be implemented. I know it must rebuild the demos that neoliberalism is breaking down. We must start from the bottom, firstly by managing to make AR rebuild the self. To do so, pain must be incarnated and politicised, but this approach to the private sphere must be the excuse for structuring pain in a reasoning that starts with “what about me”, but ends in “what about us” (Ahedo, 2021).
- In this context, the effort to attract political power to the rationale of community structure should be doubled, starting from the premise that the substratum that unites liberal institutions and AR is the irredeemable defence of democracy, although it must go beyond mere institutional or partisan expressions to incorporate conflict (Ibarra, 2010) and work, as highlighted in this text.
- However, in this game we must consider how powerful identities of resistance (Castells, 1997) opposing the status quo emerge in the face of the legitimising identities that govern liberal democracies with increasing difficulties. Some settle on the structuring of plural networks, building bridges, uniting Cinderellas; others, increasingly powerful, are committed to building trenches and walls, and undermining liberal democracy and any aspiration for justice and equality. Moreover, AR must convince the legitimating identities that there is no sense in client participatory dynamics that make “what about me” end up as lots of new “what about me”s, because in addition to not politicising created subjects, these

arguments do not create demos either, and at best create frustration which they then feed exclusionary identities with. However, it is also necessary to work so that progressive actors who face the status quo abandon maximalist arguments that begin with “what about us”, obviating the previous need to politicize pains that in this context are seen in private terms. In both cases, there is a risk that people will be discussed but without the people: in the first case from patronage; in the second from purism.

- Consequently, it would seem that the challenge, whenever possible, is to convince the actors with power, and the disempowered, to structure autonomous interconnected participation processes which seek to politicise from the public sphere, activating those who are absent (not only the elites or the sectors who are convinced and already mobilised) to convert absences into affinity, using organisational forms in which there are “many people doing little things”.
- Thus, AR faces a Herculean challenge to politicise from the periphery, from vectors that break the self, showing that loneliness, frustration, fear, inequality, sexual violence, contempt for sexual identity and skin colour are not private but public issues. It is a challenge that can turn into a wonderful, magical opportunity to see that when Cinderellas unite, they can change the story.

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