

## Special issue of the International Journal of Action Research on industrial democracy

Johan E. Ravn, Oier Imaz Alias, Trond Sanne Haga and Davydd J. Greenwood (guest editors)

Action Research is a set of practices and ethical-political commitments to promote and consolidate knowledge production, democratic social transformation, human wellbeing, and environmental sustainability. It spans a wide variety of practices, diverse ideals for human flourishing within planetary sustainability, and many kinds of organizational learning dynamics and structures. Action Research cannot be reduced to a methodology; it is a set of ways to orchestrate and sustain democratic social practice. The spectrum of Action Research approaches is very broad. It ranges from Southern Participatory Research through Community-based Resource Management, Action Research for Territorial Development to Deliberative Policy Analysis, feminist practice, to civil rights and anti-racist-classist efforts in the global “North,” to industrial democracy work in Europe, the United States, and Australia, and a host of other approaches. This inventory is incomplete, as the most recent *The Sage Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry's* 71 chapters show (Burns, Howard, and Ospina, Eds. 2022). No one of these approaches is the “right version” of Action Research. All offer frameworks, strengths, and liabilities. All have points to build on for further development.

One of the key places where the development of Action Research took place early was in manufacturing industries in the 1930s and the immediate post-World War II years. Within what we could call the cradle of capitalism, prosocial ideas developed about better quality and safer jobs and organizations characterized by participatory arrangements and practices. Significant individual successes developed in Norway, Sweden, the United States, and Australia and efforts were made to link these efforts into a general countermovement to mitigate the worst abuses of labor and the environment by capital. After a heady period of success and political support, especially in Scandinavia, this work has experienced concerted pushback from neoliberal, neo-Taylorist global capitalism and its political operators. The effects are visible in the gradual attenuation of not just industrial democratic programs but now are clearly visible in the worldwide threats to democratic governance itself. The internal threats to what seemed to be consolidated democratic societies, and the re-appearance of dictatorial expansionist regimes that are heavily armed and guided only by the lust for power and hegemony, pose a significant question for those of us who practice industrial democracy work and value democracy itself. How strong are industrial democratic ideas and practices today? Have they survived this onslaught? Can they survive neoliberal capitalism and totalitarianism in the future? Are they a source of hope for a better human future, both in human terms and in terms of the threatened planetary ecology, or will they be extinguished by insatiable greed?

This special issue aims to reinforce the dialogue and debates about the possibilities of sustaining and expanding industrial democracy and therefore social democratic institutionsm

under the current neoliberal domination of the global economy. We want to put these topics back in the public arena, but we recognize that difficulties of doing this are considerable. Prior generations of industrial democracy work relied heavily on individual cases of success and the erroneous assumption that good examples will automatically diffuse themselves and gain ground against authoritarian and neoliberal alternatives. Our argument that industrial democracy can work and survive in a world dominated by global neoliberalism and authoritarianism does not mean that there is a specific recipe by which this is accomplished and diffused more widely. To achieve a significant countermovement requires detailed analysis of successful cases, complex comparisons that do not engage in romanticization of industrial democracy, and paths for learning to identify, understand, and promote more industrial democratic developments within a larger hostile context.

This effort has two parts. The first is to make it clear that the survival and success of a wide variety of industrial democratic organizations shows clearly that such organizations are possible, even within a neoliberal global environment. The space in which they can develop and prosper still exists. The pessimism of the “left” about the neoliberal juggernaut is defeatist and unwarranted in our view.

That said, there is no simple or single recipe for efforts to develop industrial democracy. We believe that the analytical writing about these cases has ignored the facts that, while certain similar dynamics and processes characterize them, like any other kind of industrial organization, individual examples must manage to adapt constructively to quite different historical, political, cultural, ecological, and economic environments. There is no one model to follow, but rather a set of practices adapted to the local context from which lessons can be drawn. What is not possible is simple imitation to produce similar outcomes elsewhere. This creates the challenge of comparing cases of successful industrial democratic organizations that highlights and respects the integrity of their locations, histories, markets, designs, and developmental processes. This is a significant comparative challenge because the uniqueness of each case is a key part of its survival. At the same time, we argue that all successful industrial democracies do have certain larger system features and processes in common. This dialogue between similarity and difference, systems practices and path dependency is key to teasing out lessons for the future practice and expansion of industrial democratic organizations.

To address these complexities, we present two very different case examples: the Norwegian industrial democracy movement exemplified through the Aker Solutions industrial group and the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation in the Spanish Basque Country. We contend that the differences between them (different histories, different cultures, different institutional contexts and arrangements, and different scales) show that industrial democracy is capable of successful development under a wide variety of conditions. The cases also show that these successful examples cannot be ignored by the neoliberal hegemons simply because such actors detest social democracy and societal solidarity, seeing them as obstacles to their profit-taking.

To achieve this complex comparative analysis, our team has collaborated for 3 years in regular dialogues. Together we combine decades of experience with both cases. Our comparison combines general systems theory analysis, socio-technical participation, political participation, cultural perspectives on organizational dynamics, and concepts of deliberative democracy to understand how these enterprises operate and manage their ongoing challenges. The idea for this collaborative analysis emerged from Davydd Greenwood’s personal experience during a 3-year Action Research project in Mondragon in the 1980s, and his subsequent

decades of involvement in the Norwegian industrial democracy movement's various national action research projects and in Action Research PhD programs at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in collaboration with Morten Levin. While he recognized the differences between these two experiences, Greenwood felt that much could be learned about successful industrial democracy work by a systematic comparison of these cases. We had the good fortune to gain the support of the collaborators in this special issue and the interest of the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in this comparative project.

The aim of this project is to promote the expansion of organizational democracy within the global industrial system as a superior and more humane alternative to a neoliberal model, that rejects looking beyond short-term profit-maximization, no matter what the human or environmental costs are. We show that the constant process of balancing and rebalancing political and socio-technical participation is a key dynamic in keeping such industrial democratic systems updated and in the continual process of self-development necessary for viability in a changing and turbulent global environment. We show that enterprise ethos and worldview, far from being an add-on or a "soft" dimension, is the bedrock on which such systems rely, and that the so-called "rational choice" model of economics is neither rational nor adaptive.

We are not alone in these reflections. In recent policymaking in the EU, there has been an emphasis on the need for industry to be thought of differently. For example "...we believe Industry 5.0 will be defined by a re-found and widened purposefulness, going beyond producing goods and services for profit. This wider purpose constitutes three core elements: human-centricity, sustainability and resilience. A purely profit-driven approach has become increasingly untenable. In a globalised world, a narrow focus on profit fails to account correctly for environmental and societal costs and benefits. For industry to become the provider of true prosperity, the definition of its true purpose must include social, environmental and societal considerations" (Breque, De Nul, & Petridis, 2021, p. 13).

Finally, we avoid romanticizing the cases, by showing how these different systems address the very real challenges they face. We conclude that the differences between the cases show there is no one right way to create democratic organizations. The path remains open for many different versions of these more humane and clearly successful organizations. Their existence most certainly does not exhaust the possibilities for industrial democratic developments elsewhere. Rational adaptation to both the social and environmental challenges we face demands further exploration and promotion of these democratic industrial designs.

We proposed this special issue to put industrial democracy back at the center of international debates about controlling the depredations of neoliberal capitalism. To that end, we recruited four knowledgeable colleagues to comment on our essay and add their own perspectives on these issues. They are Bob Dick, Shankar Sankaran, Joseph Blasi and Douglas Kruse.

Bob Dick has been for decades a significant actor in Action Research in Australia and the curator of one of the most extensive online archives and resources on Action Research (<http://www.bobdick.com.au/resources/research.html>). An extensively published author and active Action Research consultant, his synthetic analytical perspectives are widely cited.

Shankar Sankaran is the Professor of Organizational Project Management at the School of the Built Environment and a Member of the Centre for Informatics Research and Innovation at UTS and a core researcher of Megaproject Management in its Industry Transformation Cluster at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Joseph Blasi is the J. Robert Beyster Professor, Human Resource Management (HRM) and the Director of the Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing at Rutgers University. His co-author, also at Rutgers, is Douglas Kruse, Distinguished Professor of Human Resource Management (HRM), Acting Director, Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing, and Director of the Program for Disability Research.

The co-editors of this Special Issue are:

Johan E. Ravn (Nord University/SINTEF), Professor at Nord University and Chief Scientist at the SINTEF Group. He has undertaken several action research projects, mainly in industrial organizations, and has published articles on Action Research, collaborative industrial relations and sociotechnical systems design. [johan.ravn@sintef.no](mailto:johan.ravn@sintef.no)

Oier Imaz Alias (Mondragon University) is a researcher at the Institute of Cooperative Studies (LANKI) and professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Educational Sciences. He holds a PhD in Political Science (Free University Brussels) and Philosophy (University of the Basque Country). His research focuses on worker cooperatives, and he has published articles on sustainable and multi-stakeholder governance. [oimaza@mondragon.edu](mailto:oimaza@mondragon.edu)

Trond Sanne Haga (Aker Solutions), holds a PhD from The Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Now working for Aker Solutions, a Norwegian supplier of various energy solutions, as a senior manager with responsibility for the R&D transformation project Competitive flexibility, his recent publications focus on socio-tech and alienation. [trond.haga@akersolutions.com](mailto:trond.haga@akersolutions.com)

Davydd J. Greenwood (Cornell University) Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology Emeritus and Corresponding Member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, he has published 10 books and scores of articles on Spain, universities, and Action Research for democratic organizational change. [djg6@cornell.edu](mailto:djg6@cornell.edu)

Johan E. Ravn is the corresponding editor for this Special Issue: [johan.ravn@sintef.no](mailto:johan.ravn@sintef.no)

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