

Solidarity and broadening the practices of action research

Davydd J. Greenwood

Abstract: We live in a world of runaway global social inequality and immanent planetary ecological collapse and action research is more necessary than ever. Solidarity across countries, regions, classes, and ecosystems is the only way out of these linked crises caused by neoliberal capitalism. Action research is a vibrant and heterogeneous set of democratic practices capable of addressing many of these dilemmas. Action researchers have for generations largely been content to develop their own approaches independently and the attempts to create better integrated global action research networks have yet to show the needed success. This essay argues that the lack of collaboration and solidarity across the whole spectrum of action research is an unaffordable luxury. Living up to our own ethical and political commitments, we need to find ways to treat the diversity among our own practices and political visions as sources of strength and dynamism. Beyond this, together we need to make a concerted effort to link with other groups and networks promoting fairness, democracy, sustainability and solidarity because the future without these collaborations is unsustainable.

Key words: global inequality, planetary ecological collapse, heterogenous action research approaches, collaboration, solidarity, global networking

Solidaridad y expansión de las prácticas de la investigación-acción

Resumen: Vivimos en un mundo de desigualdad social global desbocada y el colapso ecológico planetario inminente, y la investigación-acción es más necesaria que nunca. La solidaridad entre países, regiones, clases y ecosistemas es la única forma de salir de estas crisis causadas por el capitalismo neoliberal. La investigación-acción es un conjunto vibrante y heterogéneo de prácticas democráticas capaces de abordar muchos de estos dilemas. Durante generaciones, los investigadores-actores se han contentado en gran medida con desarrollar sus propios enfoques de forma independiente, y los intentos de crear redes mundiales de investigación-acción mejor integradas aún no han mostrado el éxito necesario. Este ensayo argumenta que la falta de colaboración y solidaridad entre todas las prácticas de la investigación-acción ya es un lujo inaceptable. Para estar a la altura de nuestros propios compromisos éticos y políticos, tenemos que encontrar formas de tratar la diversidad entre nuestras propias prácticas y visiones políticas como fuentes de fuerza y dinamismo. Más allá, juntos necesitamos hacer un esfuerzo concertado para vincularnos con otros grupos y redes que promuevan la equidad, la democracia, la sostenibilidad y la solidaridad, porque el futuro sin estas colaboraciones es insostenible.

Palabras clave: desigualdad global, colapso ecológico planetario, enfoques heterogéneos de investigación-acción, colaboración, solidaridad, redes globales

1. Introduction¹

While it seems like an utter commonplace to assert that the world is changing now at a faster pace and that global forces impinge on local communities and situation more insistently than ever before, I am not certain if these are simply set of new facts or that we finally are beginning to realize that we live in a world of dynamic interacting systems that we do not know how to manage in ways that support human welfare and ecological sustainability. What is clear is that what we are doing to deal with the global forces of inequality, authoritarianism, discrimination, ethnocide, collapsing infrastructures, starving social welfare systems, and rapid, dangerous global warming is not enough. Since the choice cannot be to do nothing and leave our children and grandchildren a world that is inhumane, the question that keeps forcing itself into my mind is what role should action research attempt to play in this situation. The following essay is my preliminary answer, offered in the spirit of convoking a conversation among action researchers about our role in the earth's future.

In addressing these very broad issues, I briefly take up our incomplete understanding of multiple histories of AR, the obvious global crises of inequality, ecological collapse, and emergent violence. I also try to imagine where the various strands of AR fit in and how the glaring inconsistencies between the values and approaches of AR and the way we have long handled the relations among action researchers affect our ability to deal with global crises. Finally, as I have been reading more broadly work on the analysis and possible solutions to these global problems, I am now aware of my own lack of sufficient connections to other pro-social actors who do not identify as action researchers but who share many of the values and even some of the approaches of AR. Since we all need each other in what is clearly now a pitched battle for a survivable future, this essay ends with a call for solidarity among us all.

2. Competing histories of action research

I will not take up a lot of space with this subject because I think it is familiar to anyone who follows action research. The world of action research is filled with competing definitions of what action research is, competing names for our practices, competing practices that are often pitched against one another, and diverse and divergent assumptions about the world in which action research has to operate. Years ago, Morten Levin and I argued implicitly in our first and second editions of the *Introduction to Action Research* (D. Greenwood & Levin, 2007; D. Greenwood & Levin, 1998) that action researchers should be familiar with the various major approaches to AR and make a reasoned choice for themselves. While this still seems a fair way to introduce newcomers to action research, this sort of sedate choice of positions no longer is adequate. All the approaches to action research together have been capable of doing very little to stem the tide of global neoliberalism and ecological destruction.

1 While interactions among varieties of action research is a subject that has been on my mind for a long time, some of the key thoughts for this position paper, especially in the latter parts of this essay are direct results of a writing/thinking partnership with Koen Bartels and Johan Elvemo Ravn. We are completing what was to be a new version of the *Introduction to Action Research* but that, under their influence, morphed into a more ambitious book on action research and the human future. My thanks to them for this more daring perspective.

I do want to be clear that I do not trivialize the differences among our approaches, nor do I underestimate the strengths and weaknesses of the different positions. I simply mean to say that whatever our differences, they now pale in comparison to the hegemonic systems that are overturning democracy, human welfare, and global ecological sustainability.

3. The state of the world

I do not wish to be tiresome in recounting what most readers already know but I need to be honest and direct about my own worldview as it is basic to all the arguments I make.

I now resonate strongly with the arguments in Bruno Latour's final book, Down to Earth (Latour, 2018). For Latour, we humans live in a thin shell on the planet's surface and we have become a major causal factor in its destruction. But our understanding of our position is little in evidence, and we continue to act as if it were not true. Modernity with its endless appetite for more and more completely ignores the geo-social effects that have given us pandemics, global warming, and massive inequality. Latour argues that we must adopt a "geo-social" understanding and learn to see our actions in the context of a global geo-social system that is clearly being destroyed by neoliberal exploitation of societies and the planet.

Among the features of the geo-social are massive increases in global inequality with all the struggles, conflicts, dangers, and inhumanities this inflicts. In the face of these challenges, the ascendant neoliberal response has been to support "divide and conquer" strategies, funding efforts to destroy democratic governments' abilities to curb the excesses of capitalist accumulation by cynical funding of groups and parties that make democracies dysfunctional.

The human consequences of neoliberalism are everywhere to be seen and are amply documented in significant recent works. I will share what I have been reading as an exercise in honesty and to provide those who disagree with a challenge to find sources that support their positions.

Over the years, I have found the work of Shoshanna Zuboff (Zuboff, 1989, 2019) particularly valuable and a useful complement to the Naomi Klein's The Shock Doctrine (Klein, 2007). Beginning with Zuboff's evaluation of the potential of information technology to liberate or enslave us, she asked the question why the coercive alternative was likely to prevail. Of course, she was largely right. Decades later her Surveillance Capitalism documents the wreckage of democracy and social welfare systems wrought by the enslaving use of information technology. When Klein's perspectives on the neoliberal movement and its consequences are added to Zuboff's framework, we have the seedbeds and mechanisms of the neoliberal *tsunami*.

Focused much more specifically on the way neoliberalism has gained control over governments and national systems, books like Nancy McClean's Democracy in Chains (MacLean, 2017), Levitsky and Ziblatt, How Democracies Die (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), and Greg Palast, The Best Democracy Money Can Buy (Palast, 2002) document these processes in excruciating and well documented detail. There is no doubt that the neoliberal activists and their elite capitalist funders did this in systematic detail and with a long-term time horizon while the so-called liberal left was asleep at the wheel. Now the territory to recover is almost too vast to imagine.

Another set of consequences of the imposition of neoliberalism on our societies are the health effects, not just for those who are starving and becoming climate refugees but for the supposedly favored inhabitants of the dominant neoliberal capitalist societies like the United States. This story is told in harrowing detail in Anne Case and Angus Deaton's Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism (Case & Deaton, 2020). With a plethora of data, they show that the life tables for Americans show a decline in life expectancy caused by a combination of dietary pathologies, drug addiction, alcoholism, and suicide. The United States has the most expensive and least effective healthcare system of all the industrialized societies, and it is built entirely around making profit for investors rather than providing healthcare for those who need it. To make the argument sharper, they distinguish between people with and without an advanced educational degree and show that the numbers are significantly worse for most people without advanced degrees. Of course, having turned higher education into massive and expensive moneymaking activities means that these differences reflect the economic inequalities in the United States.

Inequality is also clearly linked to the manipulation of the “losers” in the economic “wheel of mis-fortune”. Between people of color and indigenous groups, systematically despoiled for generations, the collapsing middle class, and the working class who can no longer imagine good jobs, good housing, decent education, and healthcare as a possibility for them or their children, there is an ideal Petrie dish for demagogues to distract them into blaming anyone but the neoliberal capitalists who are responsible for their condition and their poor life perspectives. This massive encouragement for nativism, authoritarianism, racism, sexism, lawlessness, civil war, refugees everywhere, and political and social incivility has worked beyond the dreams of the neoliberal architects putting people like Trump, Millie, and Netanyahu in the political driver's seat on the road to the end of the world. Of course, this bespeaks a multilateral political failure in which the supposedly “liberal side” of the spectrum has been an abject failure, either adopting neoliberalism themselves or being so shrill and irritating that they have even managed to alienate their own base.

4. Planetary ecological collapse

This topic does not require further documentation. The planet is being destroyed by greed and humanity is now condemned to live in the ruins other humans have made for them. What living in these ruins in a compromised eco-political system looks like has been remarkably well documented by Anna Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in the Capitalist Ruins (Tsing, 2015) and Verónica Gago, Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies (Gago, 2017). In a way these monumental ethnographies are tributes to human ingenuity and the ability to make something out of almost nothing. Tsing's study shows how a new economic and social order has emerged from the ruin of the forests of the Pacific Northwest by the rapacious lumber companies. What happened in these ruins is that they gave rise to ideal conditions for the highly prized and expensive Matsutake mushroom. A social order composed of an unimaginably heterogeneous population of people of different background, countries, languages and personal situations has

arisen to manage and make possible the relatively conflict free and profitable collection of these delicacies.

Gago's study deals with Las Salinas in Buenos Aires. Perhaps the largest illegal market and production facility in the world, it involves international migrants, distinct and conflicting cultural systems, diverse gender strategies and the ability to profit from global capitalism. These groups are creating goods and a complex socio-political system to manage the contradictions created by neoliberalism, all of it basically outside the law. It is not idealized in Gago's work but she gives a remarkable picture of life in the exploited ruins created by neoliberalism.

The first case is from the Global North and the second from the Global South. That should tell us that this hallowed distinction no longer matters.

5. Karl Polanyi *redux*

Karl Polanyi predicted the current world scene in 1944 when he asserted that free market capitalism would destroy the social fabric and cause a massive social reaction (Polanyi, 1944). He further argued that the social reaction, the “counter-movement”, could take one of two forms: the intensification of the democratic welfare state or the rebirth of fascism unless we organized to move the balance in the direction of the welfare state. The period after World War II and up to the emergence on the scene of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan was the zenith of welfare state capitalism with support for education, healthcare, retirement, housing, infrastructures being widely invested in. But Thatcher and Reagan, well-funded by the capitalist plutocracy brought neoliberalism into the picture and, ever since have eaten away day by day and year by year all the gains in welfare for all made during those postwar years. And as Polanyi surely would have said, the so-called left was and remains asleep at the wheel. The result is the rebirth of fascist authoritarianism just as he predicted.

6. Where does action research fit into this dreary picture?

In my view, this is precisely the urgent question we should be asking ourselves. Given the conditions I have described, it should be clear that the dominant practices of action research doing one by one interventions in a particular organization, a particular community, or a specific profession are perfectly worthwhile but will not, by simple accumulation, add up to the urgent global change processes needed. Global inequality and sustainability are large-scale interactive systems problems and cannot be addressed piecemeal.

I do not deny the existence or the value of various attempts to network AR practitioners but clearly, they have not yielded sufficiently strong networks to move global society in a better direction. There have been a variety of attempts to move toward more global networks such as GUNi (Global University Network for Innovation (<https://www.guninetwork.org/>), ATD Cuarto Mundo Cruce de Saberes (<https://www.atd-cuartomundo.org/que-hacemos/pen-sar-y-actuar-juntos/cruce-de-saberes/>), Orlando Fals Borda's “Convergence” conferences,

CLASCO (Latin American Council of Social Social Sciences (<https://www.clasco.org/>) but, as yet anyway, they have not added up to a social movement of sufficient power to push back against neoliberalism. In too many respects, the international scene for AR looks too much like the United Nations or the European Union where some dialog and policy agreements are worked out, but action is limited, and subgroup interests mainly prevail.

6.1. What about the Global South and Global North?

In no way do I deny the reality of the differences in national and regional context and histories. Colonialism, resource extraction, political coercion and suppression of indigenous groups are all part of the Global South that cannot be ignored. But colonialism is also how the Global North was built including genocide of indigenous people, slavery, and resource extraction. If the Global South and Global North are not identical, they do seem to be siblings.

By focusing so heavily on the distinction between South and North, action researchers have engaged, unintentionally, in our own version of the “divide and conquer” strategy. It enhanced the conceit that there are “developed” and “underdeveloped” or “colonized” countries and now we are jolted by what Northern practitioners of AR already knew: poverty, prejudice, genocide, and colonialism is as at home in the Global North as in the Global South. Democracy, sustainability, justice, and solidarity are on the run everywhere. But, having warned each other off our respective “territories”, we have made it difficult for action researchers in both areas to learn from and support one another.

This distracted us from learning about the diversity of situations, approaches, and projects worldwide in which action research has or could play a role. The cases of Highlander, Catholic Action, ATD Cruce de Saberes, participatory development, community-based resources management, Deliberative Policy Analysis, feminist AR, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person AR, Action Science, Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, trusts like John Lewis, the Mondragon cooperatives, and “commoning” all have something to say to each other, methods and experiences to share, and certain shared values for democracy and solidarity globally. In my personal view, the differences among us and our experiences have overshadowed our understanding of the now impossible to avoid need to collaborate to gain strength in the face of an intolerable and unsustainable world.

6.2. Do we exhibit our espoused values and practices with each other?

Despite a few attempts to bridge these gaps, I view the answer as no. Furthermore, I see this as a glaring inconsistency with the espoused premises of nearly all varieties of action research. As a general matter, we action researchers argue that action research involves appreciating and learning from differences, creating collaborative networks of action among stakeholders who have diverse ideas, experiences, and aims and building actions pragmatically to make a positive difference without overrunning the differences that exist within our midst. Since we preach this regularly, then why have we spent so little energy learning how to be solidary with each other and to coordinate our strengths and overcome our differences together?

6.3. What about non-action researchers who are actively working in ways consistent with our values and focused on the same goals of countering inequality, prejudice, racism, gender discrimination, poverty, exploitation at work, environmental destruction, and more?

Another significant cost of the emphasis on the differences among us has been the lack of sufficient attention to other forms of pro-social and pro-environmental activism in which people who do not see themselves as action researchers are actively pursuing movements to create greater equality and solidarity. Does it matter if they are inside the action research tent or not? How can we learn to collaborate with them more effectively because, all of us together are still a very small force to confront the neoliberal hegemons. There is a plethora of ways in which people are working on these issues both within action research and beyond it.

Within action research itself, efforts like Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon's efforts in GUNi, Tomás Rodríguez Villasante's work with CLASCO, and Miren Larrea's Action Research for Territorial Development (Larrea, 2020) all reach beyond the individual case approach. And there are more such initiatives.

Beyond action research there are lively, intellectually exciting, and methodologically sophisticated efforts of all sorts. I have already mentioned ATD Cruce de Saberes with its impressive track record. Moving beyond political science as a spectator activity, there are significant efforts in what is called "deliberative policy analysis" that expands the notions of governmentality in ways that conventional political science ignores (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2020; Wagenaar & Prainsack, 2021).

"Commoning" has become a rubric under which a variety of counter-movements to neoliberalism are communicating and supporting each other, as can be seen in the work of Bollier and Helfrich (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019) and many others in their broad networks.

Supporting cooperatives such as the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation and many others is another active venue for countering the premises of neoliberalism.

Supporting activities involved in the greening of heavy industry and technologies of carbon capture is another venue to work in. For example, the company Aker Solutions, a long-time oil platform builder, is now directly engaged in re-adapting their technologies to wind farms and carbon capture technologies with the goal of being out of the fossil fuel business as soon as possible. Should we not be supporting and learning from their efforts? (Ravn et al., 2023)

7. Concluding on a hopeful note

One of the most hope inspiring books I have read recently is Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Astra Taylor's Solidarity: The Past, Present, and Future of a World-Changing Idea (Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024). I need to preface this exposition by explaining my state of mind. Being now elderly and long retired, I grew up middle class in a thriving welfare state in the United States where I took for granted the social mobility, decent public schools, reasonable healthcare, thriving industry, powerful union voices, and a strong civil rights movement. I could easily see the problems of racism, gender discrimination, agribusiness, etc. but was confident they could be resolved. And then I lived long enough to see these gains not just reversed but destroyed to

the extent possible while politics turned from the art of compromise to the end of civil discourse.

In the face of this and as enthusiastic and convinced as I had become about the values and possibilities of action research by the 1980s, I became increasingly despondent about a world in which the “bad guys” seem to win every battle and where even distinguishing the “good guys” and “bad guys” has become a challenge. So my action research practice and the scale of the world transformations needed to recreate the welfare state and civil democracy seemed to be poorly matched. I have a bow and arrow and they have nuclear weapons.

In that frame of mind, I read Solidarity and it offered me two things that I want to share as an additional incentive to network more broadly. First of all, I found out that the concept of solidarity had an interesting history that was unknown to me. I had come across it in my work with the Mondragon cooperatives when I mentioned to my colleagues that they were quite egalitarian. They bristled and told me they did not believe people were equal but that they believed in solidarity among unequal, diverse people. I never forgot that moment.

Now, reading Solidarity, many disparate pieces came together for me, including a better language for talking about action research. Since I am arguing that the time has come to reach out and make common cause with each other and find bridges to the host of others who see human and environmental problems in ways similar to ours, I wanted to present one example of the kinds of others we should be reaching too. Some quotes will clarify why this seems clear to me.

...solidarity is both a theory and a practice, or what radical educator Paulo Freire called praxis, the “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.” [12] That is, solidarity is not only a thought or a feeling, a theory or a principle—it is also something you do, and it must involve others. In various ways, solidarity is related to, but distinct from, both community and identity. Inasmuch as it is something experienced, it is not a given but must be generated; made, not found (Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024, p. xv).

Solidarity...includes both rights and duties, a duty to politically participate and to be vigilant against anti-democratic forms of domination and power-hoarding. For political participation to be meaningful, it must go well beyond voting—a necessary but insufficient form of civic engagement. Our vision of a solidarity state would enable individuals to access services while also obligating them to serve their communities and the common good in return, and it would structure political participation into the fabric of everyday life with the understanding that both cohesion and conflict are necessary. In this project, shared symbols and rituals are vital in bringing us together for a collective purpose. They are the stuff that bonds communities and countries and keeps them from fragmenting or collapsing. But if we want to keep power structures from ossifying, creating space for dispute and contestation, and thus for transformation, is also key (ibid. p. 202).

The fighting faith of solidarity means believing in other people and our collective capacities to learn, to reason, to be kind, to find solutions, and to act responsibly and ethically, even, or especially, in times of crisis. With the planet swiftly tipping toward climate chaos and a right-wing reaction gaining influence globally, those of us who want our species to not only survive but thrive have no choice but to attempt to cultivate solidarity from wherever we happen to sit. Individually, the vast majority of us are locked out of the halls of power and lack wealth and influence. This means the only viable pathway to change involves organizing from the bottom up. The solidaristic, internationalist, and sustainable world order we desperately need must be built virtue by virtue, relationship by relationship, struggle by struggle, day by day. Constructing a bigger Us—one large and powerful enough to overcome the myriad obstacles in our way—is a hopeful and imaginative act: curious about other people, open to change, and determined to bring new possibilities into being (ibid, pp 312–313).

Throughout their book, they make the case that this is slow and difficult work with lots of reverses. They also argue that all kinds of actors are needed and welcome because the task is huge and the enemies are implacable. At the same time, their historical review shows that significant human gains were made by operating this way and with the concept of solidarity as its orientation point. They make a realistic and rational case for hope and also pose the

question, if not this, then what? It is a good question for us to ask ourselves as action researchers.

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Davydd J. Greenwood, Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology Emeritus, Director of the Einaudi Center for International Studies (1983–1995) and Director, Institute for European Studies (2000–2008) at Cornell University, he served as President of the Association of International Education Administrators in 1993–94. A Corresponding Member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Moral and Political Sciences (1996), he has published 10 books and scores of articles on the anthropology of Spain, universities, and action research for democratic organizational change.