

## Socio-political perspectives on action research: traditions in Western Europe - especially in Germany and Scandinavia

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# **Socio-political Perspectives on Action Research. Traditions in Western Europe – Especially in Germany and Scandinavia\***

Werner Fricke

Drawing upon experiences from Scandinavia and Germany this paper argues, that any action research project should be aware of the socio-political context, in which it is taking place and which it is a part of. As a consequence I concentrate on a socio-political perspective on action research rather than on the often used and in European AR discussion prevailing micro perspective on the single action research case. Experiences from Germany and Scandinavia demonstrate that programmes for work life reform as a framework for participative action research do not have any chance without being able to create support from broad socio-political coalitions. The question therefore is: Which is the socio-political context enabling action research as part of action and research programmes in the field of work life reform?

**Key words:** socio-political contexts of action research, micro or macro perspective on action research, Scandinavian work life programmes, humanisation of work as a context of action research in Germany

In the following paper I will not concentrate on the often used, and sometimes in European discussion prevailing, micro perspective on action re-

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search. Instead I will present a socio-political perspective. Single case, socio-political or theoretical perspectives on action research are supplementing each other. There are valuable contributions to action research discussion on single case and on theoretical level, but the full picture has to include the socio-political context, I think. The leading question here is: Which is the socio-political context enabling action research? How can action research enhance broad socio-political programmes in the field of work life reform? Under which conditions can action research contribute to social learning and development processes?

### **1. Norwegian action research tradition stimulating European action research**

The strongest action research tradition in Western Europe is Scandinavian, especially Norwegian and Swedish. The first impetus however originated from Tavistock Institute in London right after the Second World War. In the early 1950s Fred Emery and Eric Trist, members of the Tavistock Institute, developed ideas and concepts for non-tayloristic work organisation and industrial democracy. I remember well an action research report by Eric Trist and K.L.Bramforth (Trist/Bramforth 1951), in which they described typical work organization in a coal mine, which did not function without the miners' autonomous interventions. They demonstrated that technology in a mine allows for different forms of work organisation, even for participation and autonomous group work, which might be used for democratisation of industrial work.

This research report, as well as later the programme on industrial democracy, has very much inspired my own action research practice. There were no such stimuli in German sociology. In Germany, action research always had and still has a very weak position. One reason is probably the dominance of the Frankfurt school after the Second World War in Germany. Its credo was: the main task of sociology is to criticise society and to analyse its logic, but taking no responsibility for involving in other forms of trying to change it. "There is nothing good within the bad" ("Es gibt nichts Gutes im Schlechten") is one dictum by Theodor W. Adorno. A more accurate statement that

expresses the theory-oriented attitude is perhaps the one expressed by Leo Löwenthal: “Mitmachen wollte ich nie” (Löwenthal 1980).

The Scandinavian action research tradition has always been, and still is, corporatist, which means, action research projects and programmes were developed on basis of agreements between employers and trade unions, or even based on tripartite coalitions, including the state. This was and still is the case in Norway, Sweden and Finland (I am not sure about Denmark), and also in the case of the German programme “Humanisation of Working Life“.

In contrast to Scandinavia the industrial relations in England were very conflictual in the 1950s and 1960s. This was not a favourable context for developing new forms of work organisation aiming at employees’ democratic participation. The situation in Norway was very different. Norwegian relations between employers and trade unions were by tradition much more cooperative and characterised by mutual trust. Also the social democratic state was in favour of socio political reforms, including work life reforms.

Therefore, when Einar Thorsrud imported the concepts of non-tayloristic work organisation and industrial democracy from Tavistock to Norway he was able to create sufficiently broad support for his idea to initiate a state financed tripartite programme to enhance industrial democracy in Norway. This programme as well as the later evolving so called action research “star cases“ in Sweden (Udevalla, Volvo, Saab Scania) became world famous and have influenced many an international programme, including the German programme “Humanisation of Working Life“ and some of its most prominent action research cases dealing with democratic participation (Fricke et al. 1981; Ulich 1980).

## **2. The importance of a favourable socio-political context**

We are here touching an important point: The socio-political context of action research. It is not sufficient, I think, to discuss action research on base of single AR cases only. There is always a socio-political constellation which is favourable, or on the contrary unfavourable, to action research in general, to projects and programmes. That’s why we in our *International Journal of Action Research* do not restrict ourselves to publish papers on action research

itself (theory, dialogue between theory and practice, methods, lessons learnt, practical results etc). We try to avoid a narrow understanding of action research, and therefore like to include papers about the socio-political context in which action research takes place, such as developments on the labour markets (deregulation of markets, precarious work, etc), new tendencies in work organisation (market driven organisation; dependent autonomy, e.g.); new perspectives of trade union policy such as organising, growing consciousness of the need for democratic participation, situation of the *sans papiers* in France.

The second paragraph of our journal's general editorial therefore says:

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

This corresponds to social reality in which action research takes place. The opportunity to realise participative action research is directly dependent on what social reform coalitions make possible to obtain. To give an example:

The Norwegian programme on "Industrial Democracy", in the early 1960s suggested by Einar Thorsrud (a former personnel director of the chocolate factory *Freia*), was grounded on a reform constellation between employers, trade unions and the social democratic government. Basic to this was a social compromise between these groups to combine modernisation and growing efficiency of the economy with work life reforms aiming at industrial democracy; the programme was about enhancing both, modernisation and democratisation of industry.

Such a social compromise and a tripartite reform coalition also enabled the German humanisation programme. While however this social coalition in Norway and Sweden was alive for several decades up to the beginning of this century, the corresponding compromise was cancelled in Germany by the employers' association, five years after the 1976 start of the programme, in 1980. The employers' main arguments were (a) a state financed programme should not deal with questions subject to tariff autonomy of the two labour market parties (such as e.g. wage systems.), (b) social scientists should not be funded by the programme to "create conflicts in enterprises", and (c) the

programme administration should stop all programme financed activities to enlarge the realm of *Mitbestimmung* (co-determination) by creating processes of direct participation on shop floor level. This critique was especially directed against the action research project, which I and my colleagues from the research institute of Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation had developed during the first phase of the programme (Fricke 2011).

As a result of the employers' intervention the programme lost its specific profile, which immediately reduced the opportunity to get action research projects financed. Participative action research aiming at democratising industry was no longer possible. Social science, it was said, was no longer allowed to initiate conflicts within enterprises (which was the employers' understanding of participative development organisation in those days). The tripartite coalition survived until today, but on the grounds of a constantly reduced and limited thematic scale. Employers determine more and more the questions to be researched be it directly or indirectly via public opinion (cultural hegemony has been with the employers since the 1980s). The name of the programme was changed from Humanisation of Work into "Work and Technology"; one of the latest big "research" projects (2010) is named "Capacity to Innovate as a management task". Participative (action) research with a democratic impetus is out.

The development in Norway and Sweden was different: The Norwegian labour market parties codified their agreement on modernisation and democratisation in 1983. They agreed to support companies professionally and financially if they "wish to improve their situation by means of extensive employee participation in development work" (Palshaugen 1996: 147).

In Sweden the traditional consensus between labour market parties was only recently cancelled, after 40 years of existence. This development was initiated by the conservative coalition, which had won the elections in 2006 after 50 years of social democratic government.

These examples demonstrate: Programmes for work life reform as a framework also for participative action research do not have any chance without being able to create support from broad socio-political coalitions, as was the case in Scandinavia during many decades until recently. The field for action research is narrowing more and more in Western Europe. Thus, it

becomes even more important to develop action research strategies that are able to have societal impact, in order not to disappear. In this regard two questions are of particular importance: the role of the researcher in the cooperation with the people/actors of working life, and the strategy for dissemination.

I will now turn to these questions by briefly recapitulating some of the traits of development in Norway and Sweden.

### **3. Development of the research role and strategies for dissemination**

#### ***3.1 Norway: The road towards participative design***

The Norwegian Industrial Democracy Programme consisted of a series of action research field experiments devoted to develop and implement non-tayloristic work organisation. The main concept was so called “self regulating work groups“, later called autonomous or semi-autonomous work groups. “This innovation is probably the most significant contribution from Norwegian international social science to date“ (Levin 2006: 172).

From the very beginning, Norwegian labour research was deeply engaged in developing democratic forms of work organisation within the industrial democracy programme. This changed the research scene in an interesting way. The first field experiments were characterised by socio-technical concepts, which means: Technology conditions organisational design, but it does not determine work organisation (this was a great debate in Germany throughout the 1970s). In other words: A given technology is compatible with different forms of work organisation, i.e. it incorporates opportunities for humanisation of work, such as participative work design, self-regulating work groups etc. On the other hand, interdependences between technology and work organisation have to be taken into consideration very specifically by organisational redesign.

While the first generation of work researchers acted as experts following socio-technical design concepts, this approach was step by step replaced by employees’ active participation in the (re-)design process. The American-Norwegian action researcher Max Elden coined three phases to characterise this change within work research in Norway:

- in the beginning experts were travelling from field experiment to field experiment applying the methods of socio-technical design (sleeping bag generation),
- followed by researchers restricting themselves to provide methods for change activities (tool kit generation),
- and finally researchers (action researchers) supporting local initiatives and participative activities on shop floor level (do-it-yourself-generation) (Elden 1979, quoted by Levin 2006: 172).

This is interesting, because this was a process of gradual change, from social scientists acting as experts to action researchers. In those days there emerged the Norwegian action research generation as it is well known today, focused on dialogue and participation. However, even though this change in the research role resulted in greater acceptance of the researchers as change agents, the socio-political climate for supporting action research was not really improved in Norway at that time. This is among others the reason why leading researchers in Norway accepted invitations to work with action research programmes in Sweden. Another reason was the difficulty in developing successful strategies for dissemination of research results in Norway.

### ***3.2 The LOM programme in Sweden: from ‘Star cases’ to broad development processes***

Just as the field experiments of the industrial democracy programme were innovative regarding democratic participation and participative work design, it was difficult to disseminate the project findings, i.e. to organise transfer from one organisation to others. It was felt a problem to have innovative star cases without being able or not knowing how to disseminate the results beyond the single enterprise.

It was clear after intensive discussions among action researchers that it was not sufficient for successful dissemination to rely on outstanding products or design concepts (star cases). Dissemination would afford sustainable learning and development processes within enterprises and/or among enterprises, be it regional or within an industry.



The question was, how to organise such learning and dissemination processes beyond the limited time frame of a research programme, and beyond the scope of the single enterprise?

Early in the 1980s Björn Gustavsen and Per Engelstad, action researchers at the Work Research Institute, Oslo, developed and practiced the concept of what came to be termed dialogue conferences. Their idea was to bring together actors from all levels of an organisation (from top management to the shop floor) and from different enterprises into one conference and have dialogues with them about

- a joint analysis of the situation to be changed (where do we stand? What is our problem?),
- an agreement about how to change the situation (where do we want to go? What is our perspective?),
- plans for joint action to implement the change agreed upon.

It is important to understand that these conferences create a public space among enterprises in a region or industry, in which actors from different enterprises/organisations and different hierarchical levels may have dialogues to understand their situation and to agree on development concepts and their implementation. During these conferences, dialogues take place according to the criteria of democratic dialogue (Gustavsen 1992: 3-4), which Gustavsen and his colleagues had developed together with practitioners from the different action research projects of the Swedish LOM programme<sup>1</sup>. Participants are legitimated to take part by their work experience exclusively, not by authority, function or delegation by somebody else.

Dialogue conferences take place repeatedly during the course of an action research project. After the first conference, which results in agreeing on change perspectives and action plans the following conferences are about joint evaluation of interim results, reflecting the so far reached development and adjusting, if necessary, the action plans. Dialogue conferences may have from 20 to 150 and more participants.

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<sup>1</sup> LOM is the acronym for Leadership, Organization, Medbestämmande. The state financed programme was started in 1985, ending in 1990.

It is interesting to be aware of the main difference between the Swedish LOM programme and the previous action research generation represented by the Norwegian industrial democracy programme (action research as initiating broad development versus single experimental cases). I quote Gustavsen:

„... the idea of doing ‘experiments’ of one kind or another in specially selected work places exerted a strong grip on the thinking up until the middle 1970s. In the period from then and until today (sc. 1992) a quite different approach to change has emerged, in the form of what can be called broad programmes. Although these can vary, they tend to take on the following characteristics:

They are broadly defined efforts, which seek to cover all major issues, organisational levels and interest groups within the enterprise.

Many enterprises are involved in a pattern which encourages collaboration between enterprises.

Research plays a role which is complementary rather than leading.

The efforts are not steered by one single ‘theory of organisation’. ‘Theory’ can furthermore emerge as part of the process of change and does not have to be fully worked out in advance.

Insofar as general theory plays a role, it is generative theory, that is: Theory about how to create local understanding and change.

‘Results’ are diffused along a number of different channels. A main emphasis is put on personal contacts between the people directly concerned“.  
(Gustavsen 1992: 2)<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the LOM programme, dialogue conferences were the centres for planning, implementation and dissemination of change. Creating broad development processes had thus become an action research perspective for the first time in Scandinavian action research, enhanced by a public tripartite research programme.

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<sup>2</sup> Concerning the characteristics of a research programme under the aspect of dissemination it is interesting to read Gustavsen (1992: 100 ff.). Among others Gustavsen states: „As a point of departure a programme can be seen as a machinery created to generate networks“.

### 3.3 *Should we still 'look to Norway'?*

About a decade later Gustavsen transferred the idea to organise broad learning processes as a motor for regional development processes. He thought about the possibility to create social movements in regional contexts, with a great variety of regional actors taking part (Gustavsen 2003). Regional social movements may strengthen the periphery against the centres (nation state; EU), which are too far from people's social problems to be able to react appropriately and in due time. The idea to strengthen the peripheries against the centres is characterised by the same democratic impetus as the participation of employees in the design of their organisations/enterprises/regions.

Up to date the main field of action research in Norway is work research and work life reform. According to the Norwegian action researcher Morten Levin action research is today, besides sociology and anthropology, an important voice in Scandinavian social science.

I am a bit more sceptical. I know from Scandinavian colleagues that it is becoming more and more difficult to get action research projects funded, and to get access to enterprises for action researchers. This is the case in all Scandinavian countries, even in Norway and Sweden. To be academically accepted, many an action researcher and many an action research institute enter into compromises with academic standards of social science, though with limited success sometimes.

Whatever the future will look like in this respect, there are four key points regarding the historical development of action research in Norway:

- a) there was a *favourable socio-political context* (tripartite reform coalition supporting the industrial democracy and following programmes for several decades),
- b) there were established work life reform programmes, i.e. *sufficient financial funds*.
- c) there had developed a generation of *work researchers* (and work research institutes) who accepted and *used the opportunities provided by action research programmes* (this was different in Germany, see Fricke 2004),

- d) most *action researchers learned action research by practice*; their access was not by theory at universities, but from practice, i.e. a kind of “learning by doing“.

#### **4. Regional research and development milieus in Sweden as an action research field**

During the 1980s and 1990s a broad initiative to establish regional research and development milieus emerged in the Swedish public sector. The idea was originally produced within Norwegian action research, but it was practiced mainly in Sweden, because it met there with the 150 years old tradition of public “folk high schools“ and schools of agricultural and domestic sciences, later nursing schools were added. All these schools were run by local authorities and, earlier, by parish councils on a regional, decentralised basis (Tydén 2006: 180-181). Another stimulus to decentralise research and development in regional contexts came from the Swedish LOM programme. As said before, it created networks of enterprises, regional administration, research institutes, and sometimes regional universities.

In the early 1980s the public sector in Sweden was confronted with a growing need of research and development capacities. Local and regional authorities started in those years to establish a growing number of regional research environments (milieus; networks), with the financial help of the central state. In 2000 there were 82 such research milieus existing in the Swedish province. They work independent of (though in co-operation with) universities, dealing with questions of public interest such as public health care and social services, i.e. they provide scientific support to local and regional authorities in producing public goods (Tydén 2006: 187-190).

The regional R+D centres in Sweden’s public sector are dealing with practical issues. Their work is problem driven and interdisciplinary, i.e. not organised according to academic disciplines, and it is based on dialogues with practitioners from the regions. Over time they turn into regional and local innovation systems, in which research, adult education, organisational development and local administration are merged.

These milieus provide a context favourable for action research to develop. Tomas Tydén, a Swedish researcher on education (Bildungsforscher) calls the knowledge produced this way dialogical knowledge, in contrast to analogous knowledge derived from the study of texts. His expectation is that the research and development milieus outside universities will not only contribute to integrate these two kinds of knowledge; they will also develop methods of dialogical research and learning. They are more appropriate to modern work life beyond the tayloristic fabric, Tydén says, than the hierarchical division of science and practice, which is so deeply influencing all our societies and social life. This is truly an action research perspective.

### **5. To summarize: The core of Scandinavian action research is making use of social science for work life reform**

Is there science, is there theory in the kind of Scandinavian action research presented above? The Norwegian action researcher Oyvind Palshaugen says:

From the outset, the Norwegian tradition of action research has followed the purpose of making use of social science as a contribution to working life reforms. As we (have seen), the strategy has changed considerably throughout the years.... The acknowledgement of scientific knowledge as complementary, not superior, to the knowledge of laymen, ... (has) been an important aspect of the strategy from the beginning (Thorsrud 1969). ... The development through a number of various action research programmes and projects has shown that the substantial scientific knowledge of how to organize the processes of development and change of work organisation is the kind of complementary knowledge that is most important and most suited to practical use“ (Palshaugen 1996: 151-152).

Making use of social science as a contribution to work life reform is the core of Scandinavian action research: This should not be misunderstood as a kind of applied social science. Another misunderstanding would be to conclude that this type of action research is “only“ producing methodological knowledge (“how to organise processes of development and change“), but not theoretical knowledge.

The distinct separation of methodological and theoretical knowledge is a simplification, as is the separation between practical and theoretical knowl-

edge. In knowing how to organise development and change in an organisation as well as in producing such kind of knowledge from action research processes, all kinds of knowledge (practical, methodological and theoretical) amalgamate. The action researcher will produce theoretical knowledge about the functioning of an organisation, he/she will produce methodological knowledge about how to organise a process of development, and he/she will produce actionable (useful) knowledge incorporated in a new, participative work organisation. In action research action and research, action and knowledge, and different kinds of knowledge are integrated. Lewin said „If you want to know an organisation, you have to change it“: this is production of knowledge by action.

I will stop here. There are many streams of action research that might have been mentioned in addition: The Action Learning, Action Research (ALAR) movement in Australia (Bob Dick); the action research school in Bath (England) around Peter Reason with its broad international network; the Swedish school of interactive research (Linköping university); several action research centres in the US, and probably more. It is the main purpose of this seminar in Porto Alegre to create an international platform for exchange and dialogue between these different international streams of action research. Our *International Journal of Action Research* has started this dialogue in the past by publishing special issues on

- Participatory Action Research in Latin America (IJAR 1(1) 2005,
- the Swedish concept of Interactive Research (IJAR 3(3), 2007,
- the diversity of action research (IJAR 3(1+2), 2007.

Against this background, I will end by underlining the need for any kind of action research to both in theory and practice reflect upon the socio-political context within which it is performed: whatever conditions the socio-political context might be, at any time and in any particular country/region.

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