

Editorial

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This issue contains four very diverse articles, different as to their research tradition and scientific orientation. There is *Danilo Streck's* genuine action research article on "Popular education, participatory research: Facing inequalities in Latin America". *Robert Farrands'* "Opening to the world through the lived body: relating theory and practice in organisation consulting" may be called a reflective report on a consultancy practice based on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the embodied human being. The author relates theory to practice through describing and reflecting an indirect, affect laden way of working with clients. *Ole Fogh Kirkeby* argues in his paper that traditional continental philosophical traditions and concepts like *phronesis* have become parts of the ideology pursuing a pseudo-humanist version of liberalist power in American business economics and social science; this has led to the misuse of concepts like *phronesis* and dialogue in management consultancy and coaching. Beyond this argument his paper "Phronesis as the sense of the event" presents a broad and intensive discussion of *phronesis*, based on the Platonian version of this concept. *Klaus Dörre and colleagues'* paper titled "Organizing – A Strategic Option for Trade Union Renewal?" is far more than just a usual industrial relations discussion on trade union renewal. Based on thorough empirical research (though not action research) it presents a grounded political analysis of the present state and possible future perspectives of trade union policy in capitalist societies, especially in the US and Germany.

The editors decided to present this variety of articles because we feel it a necessary and important stimulus for action research to be confronted from time to time with research concepts and results beyond the (sometimes too

narrow) understanding of action research, especially when it is limited to isolated cases. Danilo Streck's paper is an excellent demonstration of the great political, research and educational capacities action research is able to develop, when it opens itself to and deals with the fundamental problems of the societies and cultural traditions which the action researchers are part of – in his paper presented here the “culture of silence” in Latin America.

Below we will in two sections (A) and (B) present the main points of this issue's four papers.

A) Action research in socio-political contexts

Danilo Streck understands and reflects participatory research and popular education as parts of social movements in the second half of the 20th century, “which grew out of the context of strong consciousness of the inequalities in Latin America and the struggle for social justice, on its turn accompanied by equally strong repression” (Streck, p. 13). He relates to the approaches developed by Orlando Fals Borda, Paulo Freire and Carlos Rodrigues Brandão¹ whose writings and practice were all dedicated to develop “knowledge, and ways of knowing, which would be able to generate changes in our unequal societies” (p. 14). This is a burning topic in our present situation, not only in Latin America, but also in Europe and Northern America, Asia: i.e. worldwide. There is a lot to be learnt, in “Western” societies and their research, from the Latin American understanding and practice of action research and its impact on social change.

Of special interest seems to us the convergence of participatory research and popular education, which has been developed – as Streck points out – both in social movements and in theory, as a result of ongoing efforts and struggles to transform society. Both in research and education, “people try to find alternatives outside traditional educational and academic institutions, due to their limitations in terms of a real involvement in the transformation of society ... research leaves its safe haven at the university ... to get involved

¹ See Brandãos (2005) contributions to „Participatory Action Research in Latin America“. Special issue of *International Journal of Action Research*, 1(1).

with a multiplicity of partners in order to understand the reality to be transformed” (Streck, p. 18). “Through the convergence of these practices a method for knowing reality was constructed. It was used both for pedagogical and investigative purposes, turning a strict delimitation of boundaries between education and research almost impossible” (Streck, p. 14). The author highlights five aspects of the method that were forged in these practices: “the contextual character of knowledge; protagonisms or participation; the recognition of the other; the encounter of different types and ways of knowing, and the diversity of mediations” (Streck, p. 18 f.).

There are many experiences reflected in the paper which shed new light on many a research practice. “Recognizing the other requires a critically vigilant attitude, avoiding both falling into ... the simple affirmation of the other or in an idealized view ... of their knowledge”. In both cases, according to Brandão, the research is no longer participatory, but is endangered to become “accomplice research” (Streck, p. 24). Another point that struck us is Streck’s notion of “epistemological orphanage” of much of the Third World research due to a historical dependence on theoretical developments imported from the North. This is a clear warning not to neglect the cultural embeddedness of theory, but on the contrary to be conscious of the need and possibility to further develop theory from within the social and cultural context of society. In Latin America this means developing theory and the ways of knowing as part of an emancipatory practice, “bringing to light social practices and the voice of social agents that have been kept within the *culture of silence*” (Streck, p. 30) since the times of colonisation.

The paper by Dörre/Holst/Nachtwey is not based on action research, but similar to Streck these authors understand the need and challenges of social change. Based on solid empirical research, their analysis aims at identifying possible starting points for a renewal of trade unions. There is certainly a deep crisis in union representation; following US American authors such as Turner/Cornfield and Frege/Kelly Dörre et al. focus “on the strategic choice of trade unions to act creatively in order to renew themselves” instead of repeating the fatalist arguments of many a trade union analysis. “Movement orientation, membership participation, and campaigning capacity ... (constitute) a realm of possibilities within which a strategic choice can be made by

the trade unions” (Dörre et al. p. 34). The authors, located at the sociological institute of the University of Jena unfold their “Jena approach”² about trade unions’ power resources. They distinguish and discuss three different kinds of power resources: (a) structural power grounded on the status of “certain groups of blue and white collar workers within the economic system”, (b) organisational power, “acquired through strategically planned collective action and formal organisation” and (c) institutional power which may be understood as accumulated power generated over time from the other two resources (structural and organisational power) (Dörre et al. p. 35 ff.).

The highlight of the article, however, is the political perspective unfolded at the end of the paper. To rely simply on organizing approaches, the authors argue, is not sufficient for trade unions to overcome their long lasting crisis of representation. “It may in the best case be possible to recruit new members through elaborate campaigns in the short-term, (but) these are not lasting affiliations. ... Organizing approaches will not get around answering their addressees’ questions of meaning”. Pragmatic answers to their present crisis and a withdrawal from the political stage, due to their acute weakness in representation, would not lead trade unions out of their present crisis. On the contrary: The economic and social crisis “is the time for them to prove that they present universal and widespread social concerns”, Dörre et al. argue with Colin Crouch, and they understand the redefinition of economic democracy as such a concern. Organizing campaigns will only be successful if they are embedded in a strategy to democratise economic decisions of global companies. “Due to the scope of their decisions, such companies have long ago become public institutions, which need to be controlled by an internal collective will involving the participation of the workforces”.

A strategy of economic democratisation, however, “requires an alternative concept of society”, the authors continue. Here they see “a central ideological (and we would add: theoretical) weakness of the labour movements in the centre states ... For decades not only US American trade unions, but also the German unions, have abandoned the formulation of an alternative social project”. Dörre et al. see very clearly that, though it may be taken as a “dis-

² See footnote 1, page 35.

tant, outright utopian goal”, a debate on economic democracy and control by the workforce would have an immediate political effect insofar as it is “a distinguished criterion as opposed to authoritarian crisis solutions”.

To sum up: The authors are realistic enough to understand that the trade unions will by themselves not be able to initiate a process of renewal which will, in the long run, make them the social actor of an alternative social project. What they need are “challenges from social movements and support from the political sphere...To interlock the production of power of wage earners *in new ways* (our italics, eds.) with the political public, discourse and consumers’ power ... and other organisations within civil society” will open a fourth source of trade union power, which the authors call associated power (all quotations Dörre et al., p. 58-63).

It is this perspective of new forms of economic democracy, embedded in an alternative concept of society, combined with reflections on possible political strategies to generate associated power in society and economy, that makes the difference – the difference between this political analysis and the bulk of traditional industrial relations discussions on trade union renewal. We feel the need to confront the usual action research debate from time to time with this kind of socio-political discussions. These debates are rare in societies of the North. As Danilo Streck’s paper demonstrates they take mainly place in the South, at least in Latin America, where action research is part of them. We see *International Journal of Action Research* as a forum for such an extended dialogue on action research, searching and reflecting on future perspectives of our societies.

B) Philosophical aspects of Action Research

According to *Fogh Kirkeby* we cannot perform our actions successfully if we are not really involved in the events we are a part of. This is true not only for action researchers but for all people, Fogh Kirkeby says. This wisdom is not as obvious as we perhaps would like it to be, but at least it is old wisdom: Fogh Kirkeby shows that alertness to the events one is a part of was an important ethical issue to the ‘old Greeks’ – if perhaps not always in their actions, but at least in their discourses on action. Interestingly, Fogh Kirkeby

approaches his plea for “the sense of the event” via a discussion of one of the concepts from Greek culture that is subject to a thrilling renaissance in our culture today, in diverse segments of discourses on working life: the concept of *phronesis*. Most often this concept is translated as “prudence”. Fogh Kirkeby argues convincingly that this translation, or rather, this re-conceptualisation of *phronesis* is – among others – due to the fact that today almost all interpretations and deliberations on the concept of *phronesis* start with a reading of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*,³ which in certain important respects differs from the way Aristotle’s predecessor, Plato, conceived *phronesis*.

Fogh Kirkeby understands Plato’s concept of *phronesis* as being less pragmatic, more epistemic; he claims that in a sense Plato’s concept of *phronesis* is not totally de-coupled from Plato’s ‘world of ideas’ – which may be interpreted as one way to formulate the point that even though *phronesis* is about insight in mundane life, we cannot claim to have full knowledge of our ability to have such knowledge. Or, to put it another way: Fogh Kirkeby warns us from doing away with our sense for what is regarded metaphysical problems, but he does not make us believe that metaphysical problems will find their solution in any kind of metaphysics. Fogh Kirkeby may have a sense for metaphysics, but he clearly has an even stronger sense for the *event*. Hence the title of his article: “Phronesis as the sense of the event”.

It is the event that matters. But what then, is an event? Fogh Kirkeby takes the reader through an intellectual journey that may appear quite abstract, but if the reader takes the effort to follow him on this journey, he/she will find that the destination is the concrete *event*. In practice, there are multitudes of events, and Fogh Kirkeby ends his article by considering examples of how “phronesis as sense of the event” may give sense in different kinds of events – among them in the field of action research. I will here not try to give an account of his conclusion, in particular since it is a conclusion that does not follow the etymological meaning of *conclusion* – which means to “close

³ For this tradition see Olav Eikeland (2006): Phronesis, Aristotle, and Action Research. In: International Journal of Action Research, 2(1):5-53.

together". Rather, Fogh Kirkeby ends his article by reopening our minds for the sense of the event.

Also in *Farrands'* article, "event" is an important category; however he approaches this issue from a different angle: Farrands is convinced that action research projects can hardly be performed successfully without the action researcher being personally involved in the events that take place in the field. However, this causes some kind of dilemma: On the one hand many aspects of the interesting personal experiences made in the field are rather unique. On the other hand, when writing articles from the projects, it is necessary to conceptualise just those aspects of the experiences that are of *general* interest. Attempts are often made to solve this dilemma by introducing a general frame of reference, a theoretical framework, inside which the experiences function as empirical 'illustrations' of the general theory. The problem with this strategy is the risk that the empirical examples do not give us any more knowledge or new insight than was already contained in the general theoretical framework.

Farrands is confronted with this problem. His article starts with a quite successful combination of a certain way to read Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception with the use of insights from Gestalt theory – the figure-ground relationship in particular. Building on a number of earlier and recent works interpreting Merleau-Ponty in this way, Farrands argues clearly and convincingly that the human subject is an *embodied* human subject, and as such is the source of two interrelated but different kinds of intelligibility: perceptual intelligibility and conceptual intelligibility. To simplify a bit, we may say that the former refers to the kind of understanding we obtain through our [bodily] senses, while the latter refers to the kind of understanding we obtain through our discursive capacities. These two kinds of intelligibility are different, but nevertheless interwoven in a very complex way, which is indeed not easy to conceptualize adequately. From a philosophical point of reference one might say that they mutually constitute each other, but since this 'mutuality' is not really symmetric, the vocabulary of Gestalt theory is perhaps more apt, in claiming that the relationship between conceptual and perceptual intelligibility may be considered as a figure-ground relationship. This is not only because the figure-ground relationship expresses an asymmetric relationship,

but also because – as we know – the relationship is not fixed: what is ground may become figure and vice versa.

The question, then, is of course: how can action research benefit from acknowledging these two kinds of intelligibility? This question is also raised by Farrands. Put a bit bluntly, the main point in his answer is that we should not suppress the perceptual intelligibility, and make just the conceptual intelligibility conduct our thoughts, actions, reflections – and writing. Farrands himself frames this question less bluntly, more dynamic: “How might a practitioner aim to *live out* the dynamic interdependence, suggested as abstracted theory, of the intertwining of conceptual and perceptual realms?” And what is more important, this way of posing the question allows him to answer it by a number of *examples*, by which his theoretical perspectives and personal experiences highlight each other mutually.