

# Beyond the margins of neoliberalism: Biological and Neurological Foundations of Action Research

Igor Ahedo Gurrutxaga

**Abstract** This text maintains that the presuppositions of individualistic empiricism have been instrumental for the neoliberal revolution, which turns supposed aggressiveness and natural selfishness into a foundation of society. The combination of science that denies the relational, emotional and subjective nature of humans with the naturalisation of individualism and competition as supposed bases of human behaviour combine to hinder Action Research's aim of "self-determination" (Fricke, 2018). However, true relational parameters, located in and empathic with the living, fit perfectly with the assumptions of AR. Therefore, we explain how discoveries in biology not only show that the bases of Action Research are not heretical from a scientific point of view, but that they fit in perfectly with the true parameters of behaviour identified by the life sciences.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism; Biology; Neurology; emotions; science

## Más allá de los márgenes del neoliberalismo: Fundamentos biológicos y neurológicos de la investigación-acción

**Resumen** Este texto defiende que los presupuestos del empirismo individualista han sido funcionales para una revolución neoliberal que convierte una supuesta agresividad y egoísmo natural en fundamento de lo social. La combinación de una ciencia que niega el carácter relacional, emocional y subjetivo con la naturalización del individualismo y la competencia como supuestas bases del comportamiento humano se conjuran para dificultar la apuesta de la Action Research por la "autodeterminación" de las personas (Fricke, 2018). Sin embargo, los verdaderos parámetros relacionales, situados y empáticos de lo vivo encajan a la perfección con los presupuestos de la AR. Para ello, explicamos cómo los descubrimientos en genética, biología y neurología muestran que las bases de la Action Research no solo no heréticas desde un punto de vista científico, sino que se ajustan a la perfección con los verdaderos parámetros del comportamiento que identifican las ciencias de la vida.

**Palabras clave:** Neoliberalismo; Biología; neurología; emociones; ciencia

I set out really to change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.

Margaret Thatcher, 3–5–1981, Sunday Times

I would like to acknowledge the suggestive and thoughtful comments made by David Greenwood to the original manuscript.

Our brain is a prodigious enigma made up of tens of billions of neurons, whose connections allow more interactions than the particles that probably exist in the universe (Capra, 1996). Despite not making up more than 8% of our bodyweight, it consumes 20% of our energy because of the permanent monitoring required by “self-awareness” (Ramachandran, 2003; Damasio, 2019). This is an effort compensated for by the emergence of the self and its surprising consequences: reflection on emotions in the form of feelings; the possibility of coordinating reflexive behaviour that language and society allow; even the paradox of being able to think about the origin of what it is to be alive and the meaning of our existence (Damasio, 2010). Researching and acting thanks to our brain, we have identified the principle of homeostasis as the foundation of life (Damasio, 1994). In a constant search for balance, we have found the art of looking for well-being (Diamond, 2013) and compassion in the face of pain (Lozada et al 2011). We have come to understand life as autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 1987) and we have even placed ourselves above the living (Leakey & Lewin, 1996). We have created gods and we have believed ourselves to be gods (Harari, 2014). Consciousness derived from the prodigious enigma of our brain has led us to think that we are prodigiously above any enigma (Fromm & Suzuki, 1960). However, despite everything, our brain is easily manipulated. Margaret Thatcher knew it very well, when she ended her interview with the phrase at the start of this text. She knew that whoever correctly defined the approach could control the mind, and from there, they could conquer the soul.

In this text, we want to reflect on how cognitive frames affect the way that we approach reality. The goal is to help understand the practical limits that Action Research (AR) faces. We propose that the hegemonic approach to science and human nature has been instrumental to a “neoliberal governmentality” (Foucault et al. 2008) that seeks to subjectify individuals through isolation and competition. Like Fricke (2018), we trust in human agency; however, we also believe that the unconscious assumption of the framework that naturalises competition and individualism creates practical difficulties in achieving the goals that inspire AR. We believe that despite the fact that human behaviour is based on “the capacity for and interest in democratic participation and self-determination” (Fricke, 2018. p. 90), the project of conquering the soul that this Thatcher quote exemplifies aims to strip society of its agency, laying waste to the ground where AR can germinate.

In fact, one of the key elements that neoliberal governmentality is based on is utter distrust for anyone who is not at the pinnacle of power. Thus the need to audit and discipline continuously. One way to confront this logic is to show resistance, to prevent neoliberal aspiration from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hürtgen & Voswinkel, 2017). In fact, experiences related on platforms such as ARNA, or articles in IJAR or ARJ are examples of the persistent, constant resistance of groups and communities against neoliberal subjectification. In line with this aspiration to strengthen human agency, we believe it is important to reveal the falsehood of the naturalising assumptions on which the art of neoliberal government is based, since identifying the false conception of human nature on which they stand can reinforce the position of Action Research. As we will demonstrate, the natural sciences, far from confirming the individualistic, distant ethos of the hegemonic framework, legitimise the epistemological and anthropological assumptions of AR.

Consequently, this text aspires to reveal the falsehoods on which the neoliberal framework is built. In parallel, supported by current discoveries in the natural sciences, it seeks to strengthen an alternative interpretation framework about science and human nature that reinforces the role of people as transforming agents. To do so, we propose a route along the