

Discussion paper: When the Cinderellas unite¹

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In the practice of action research, it is important to get things right with a good analysis of reality. Tools such as sociograms (Ganuza, 2010) allow us to define the formal and informal spaces that underlie a problem, the capitals of the actors involved, their level of access or exclusion from power, and the density or absence of their relationships. From a global perspective, at the beginning of the text that heads this section, Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea and Streck (2022) focus on delimiting the position of individuals in the sociogram of our societies, which are marked by the neoliberal revolution, disaster capitalism and vigilance: the raw material with which AR works (citizens) is a broken individual, adrift, “incoherent and apolitical in their desires and needs” (2022: 10).

This crude definition is not unknown to those of us who work with local communities, and it can be seen as the result of two complementary processes. On the one hand, the breakdown of community networks, resulting from material changes that promote the importance of the self in our societies. Needless to say, this argument has been exacerbated by undermining caused by the neoliberal individualist ideology. On the other hand, since 2008 the erosion of community networks has had the rupture of the individual added to it. The accelerated context of uncertainty and objective or subjective precariousness in which we are immersed, aggravated by Covid, has dashed the hopes of thousands of people who cannot find comfort in an “outside” marked by the weakening of community and identity networks. Thus, if we look at the analysis of reality, we must be aware that we work in cracked territories, in a barren land where community ties have been broken, and dozens of broken dolls survive adrift on the currents (Mirowski, 2009).

Perhaps for this reason, in my practical work energising local communities with Participatory Action Research processes, the metaphor of Cinderella emerges strongly. This symbol embodies those sectors I work with to change the sociogram of reality and access new forms of power. Ultimately, I understand that we work with (and like) Cinderellas, seeking to change the story of their (our) lives. Deep down, I believe that the objective of AR is none other than to change the story, as a metaphor for a change in reality needed by vulnerable people more accustomed to scrubbing floors (like Cinderella), than dancing in luxurious salons (like stepmothers).

In my two decades of research and community participatory action, when I go out into the neighbourhood, I detect a growing isolation of people increasingly traversed by not only objective, but increasingly subjective vulnerabilities and exclusions. Asking oneself, as Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea and Streck propose, about the role that action research should play in these times means, in my opinion, accepting that in the face of the utopian dimension of modernity, the victory of neoliberalism is increasingly diagnosed by people in a depoliticised way (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Mirowski, 2013). It is increasingly difficult for people to understand that their situation of vulnerability, marked by an inability to pay their mortgage, take care of their dependent children, get papers, or find affordable housing is not down to their bad

¹ This paper is written in response to the article “On Social Productivity and Future Perspectives on Action Research” published in this issue of International Journal of Action Research.