

40 years in 40 minutes

Interview with Øyvind Pålshaugen

### **Danilo and Miren:**

Thank you, Øyvind, for granting this interview to the *International Journal of Action Research*. After your long trajectory with AR, and also in this journal, we want to integrate your insight in the emergent discussions we propose in this issue about the future challenges of AR. Let us start by giving the reader a perspective of your trajectory. How did you come to AR? You could certainly not study it at university. And how did you come to The Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo?

### **Øyvind:**

That is correct. Even though I started to study sociology in the hope that if I understood society better, I would be better equipped to change it. I was far from the only one with that hope. However, those examples of action research that some of the academic staff were involved in, did not attract my interest. They were exerted mostly for the sake of using scientific knowledge to reinforce action, and less for using action to reinforce scientific knowledge. Having refused to join the army after college, my interest in politics rose considerably. This was in the early seventies, and the options for jumping into political action were many: there were many white feathers on the left wing, to put it that way. However, I could not fail to notice that pretty much of the political activity of the student's at the university was much about "paroles" and that the "parliament of the streets" was in fashion. It was a politics of words, which were both written and shouted out with lots of energy, but the fate of this energy appeared to me like the steam from a safety valve: it dissolved in the air.

I turned my back on the streets and went into the libraries. At the time, also Marx was in fashion, and after having read his texts on historical materialism I acquired a Danish translation of *Das Kapital*: all three volumes (12 in Danish), to read and discuss it within a not too large group of like-minded. We read this work not in the spirit of any kind of Marxism, but in the spirit of the last sentence in Marx' foreword to *Das Kapital*: "Every opinion based on scientific criticism I welcome. As to prejudices of so-called public opinion, to which I have never made concessions, now as aforesaid the maxim of the great Florentine is mine: *Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti*" [Follow your own course, and let people talk (paraphrased from Dante).

Thus, while reading Marx, it was necessary also to read Keynes and followers. To make a long story short by an understatement, it became pretty clear to me that attempts to change society, without engaging in the question of how to change the production system of society, were simply too superficial. This led me to join a group of students who were devoted to "the sociology of work and industry", and finally to a Master degree in this field in sociology. An empirical study of how economic and technological parameters conditioned the shaping of the

specific patterns of workplaces at a cable factory through the period from 1945–1975, was the outcome.

Having besides studied psychology, mostly Freud, and critical philosophy of language, I had not given much attention to what I should do for a living after having obtained my Master degree. I had heard about WRI, since the professor that was responsible for teaching on “sociology of work and industry”, Ragnvald Kalleberg, had a collegial and intellectual relationship with Bjørn Gustaven, who at the time was the director of WRI. This was due to their common interest in Habermas’ theories of society, communication and dialogue. My impression of WRI at the time (1981) was that it was a social-democratic milieu that in their research co-operated closely with the employers’ and the employee’s national organizations.

Regardless of my impression, a few months before I finished my Master degree, I was headhunted to WRI by Gustavsen, via Kalleberg, to undertake a one-year study of the work environment of the garbage collectors of Oslo city. So I did. During this year I discovered that Gustavsen had a great intellectual capacity – and appetite. In particular his ability to grasp philosophical and theoretical ideas he found exciting, and to make productive use of them in the action research he and his close colleagues were doing, was striking. By the end of this first year I wrote a 120 pages research report about the garbage collectors, which led to nothing. Per H. Engelstad, the closest colleague to Gustavsen, and the researcher at WRI who was most engaged in the renewal in the kind of conferences that came to be termed dialogue conferences, suggested to organise one, with a large contingent of garbage collectors and their management as participants. From then on, real improvements of their work environment came to be exerted. The same happened to me, albeit in a different way. I told Gustavsen that I wanted to read Habermas’ book *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, which had been published in 1981, and write an article about it. He answered “fine”. Shortly after, Engelstad invited me to join him at a dialogue conference on regional development, in Western Norway. I answered “fine”. The rest is history...

#### **Danilo and Miren:**

What authors have been important reference points in your work? Could we say that Wittgenstein had a special influence on it?

#### **Øyvind:**

That would not be wrong, but if so, Wittgenstein is to be regarded *primus inter pares* with Foucault in my work with action research. With your permission, I will elaborate a little on this point.

My first publication in English on action research was written in 1987 for an international conference in Oslo, devoted to the memorial of Einar Thorsrud. The heading of the session for which I wrote my contribution, was: Can Social Science Contribute to Industrial Democracy? My article opens with a suggestion of posing this question slightly differently: Can a flow of words contribute to industrial democracy? To this question there might be many ways to answer. However, none of them can be given without using just a flow of words; but not just a free flow: Any use of words must be undertaken appropriately if the words are to be understood by others, and that what is appropriate is dependent on which kind of discourse the actual use of words is embedded in.

By opening my article in this way, I could easily remind us of the fact that within society there are many kinds of discourses, of which the discourse of social science is one. Then, I