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**New Ways of Studying Europe? Participatory Action Research in the Service of European Studies**

**Karen Heard-Laureote, Helen Drake, Andrew Waterman**

Introduction

For centuries the institutions of academia and science have claimed ownership of the purpose of knowledge-making (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p2). More recently, a greater emphasis has been placed on the existence of different levels or 'modes' of knowledge. Gibbons *et al* (1994), for example, refer to abstract, conceptual forms of knowing and the application of practical knowledge. Far from accepting the traditional superiority of the former, other scholars argue that both forms of knowledge should hold equal value (Schön, 1983; 1995) whilst those with a more 'action-orientated' background would argue that the latter is the central priority (e.g. Fals Borda, 2001; Freire, 1970). In many ways this debate cuts to a central question concerning the role of the academic in society. Is the academic's role that of an expert, a practitioner, or a combination of the two?

Action Research (AR) is a social science methodology and, to some, philosophy that to varying degrees conceptualises the role of the academic as that of a social practitioner. Far from dealing in abstract theories, AR's purpose is to facilitate ordinary people in addressing common problems that emerge from their daily lives (Park, 2001, p83). Academic 'objectivity' is rejected in favour of subjective goals, namely the improvement of individual lives and of society in general. Ideological investment in the purpose and outcome of the research is welcomed, not frowned upon. As AR has gradually evolved as an accepted methodology within key areas of social science, closely related forms such as Participatory/Participant Action Research (PAR) have also emerged. Whilst maintaining the core values of AR, PAR rejects the more 'applied' nature of some AR in favour of equal participation and purpose between the researcher and the researched, adopting a cyclical rather than linear approach[1] (Khan and Chovanec, 2010, p35). However, despite its seeming suitability with political science (a field in which academics are increasingly asked to fulfil an 'impact' agenda) and its related fields, AR has, until very recently, barely warranted a

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[1] From this point on, the more general term of AR will be used unless the specifics of PAR are directly referred to.

mention. Instead, AR is recognised as a legitimate research methodology in many other social science fields such as sociology, education and organisation studies, psychology, anthropology and many others.

This dilemma is what has prompted the writing of this paper. The research that we are currently engaged in offers the opportunity to utilise AR for the benefit of academia and specific actors in three cases; 1) trade unions, 2) the European Coalition for Vision (ECV) and 3) the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) respectively.

Case 1 explores how trade union influence over world trade negotiations has changed over time. As a union activist, the researcher's use of PAR allows direct collaboration with trade unionists (for example, by attending union meetings or actively organising forums) to discuss how to improve the union's effectiveness, understand how they influence negotiations and analyse their internal mechanisms and debates. It is expected that this approach will simultaneously generate very detailed ethnographic data and help decrease the democratic divide between union leaders and their members, one of the major weaknesses of their method of influence over trade negotiations.

Case 2 explores how the ECV emerged and developed as a European-level network between October 2012 and February 2014. As a network observer and Special Advisor to the ECV's chair, the researcher's use of PAR allows direct collaboration with ECV network member organisations to support and guide the formal establishment of the network at EU level. This approach has generated detailed ethnographic data in the form of participant observation at ECV meetings and communications via the members' email distribution list as well as interview data from semi-structured interviews and data derived from documentary analysis.

Case 3 brings a historical study of the academic association UACES into the present via the researcher's current role as Association Chair. The context of that study is a broader attempt to trace the history of European Studies in the UK's universities (and schools) via two key questions: firstly, how do new subject disciplines such as European Studies (ES) become embodied and institutionalised and what role does a subject association play? And secondly, which broader norms and values (with regard to power and change, for example) are at play in such developments, and (how) can a subject association such as UACES mediate between players in these regards? The researcher's position within academia covers three roles, that of a researcher, a teacher and a professional practitioner. This positionality provides the

researcher with a unique opportunity to conduct research that borrows from the register of PAR. Importantly, these roles can also be characterised as that of an *observer* (as an academic), a *participant* (as UACES Chair) and a *stakeholder* (in the research, whereby scholarship is itself a form of engaged action).

Due to the absence of AR from European Studies methodologies we offer the above examples to highlight the potential for research of this nature to be carried out within the field of political science broadly and European Studies specifically. With this issue in mind the purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, we consider why AR has yet to significantly influence the field of political science in any meaningful sense. Is there something at the heart of AR as a methodology and philosophy that does not fit with the traditions and mindset of political science, or has political science as a discipline merely been slower than other fields in embracing methodological developments towards an action agenda? With this in mind, the second purpose of this paper is to advocate AR as a legitimate political science methodology that has the potential to bring both valuable ethnographic data to the field but also fundamentally challenge traditional research philosophies. Further, we argue that AR offers an outlet to politically engaged political scientists who can utilise their beliefs and links with social movements, communities and networks to develop exciting new strands of ethnographic data. To fulfil these purposes we will construct a brief and selected overview of the AR literature, consider some of the key themes of AR as a methodology before concluding with some thoughts on what AR could bring to political science and European Studies.

The Roots of Action Research

The work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin is generally credited with laying the basis for the development of AR over the last 70 years. In Lewin's seminal paper, *Action Research and Minority Problems* (1946), the main tenets of AR are clearly laid out and largely remain to this day despite huge advancement in the field since. Although essentially maintaining an applied social science outlook at this stage, Lewin envisaged AR as a process of creating an experiment to achieve a specific social goal (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, p17). Central to this process was the participation of the 'subjects' he was investigating at every stage of the action research cycle, not observing them in the traditional sense. This logic was based on previous experiments which "had showed the power of group decision in producing

commitment and changes in attitudes and behaviour" (Kemmis, 1980, p3). Despite the applied nature of Lewin's method (which would gradually recede as AR developed), the notion of utilising participation with a specific social goal in mind was a revelation in social science. Central to this methodological approach was Lewin's (1948) concept (heavily borrowed from Hegelian dialectics) of how social change occurred. Using a thermodynamic metaphor, Lewin argued that social change should be seen as a process of unfreezing (dismantling former structures), floating (changing the structures) and freezing (locking change back in to a permanent structure). This dialectical approach has been replicated throughout the history of AR with social change (of varying degrees) as the central *purpose* of the research.

The innovative participatory and action-orientated approach of Lewin found its logical expression in the relationship between the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and the British government in the immediate post-war period. In part, this relationship was constituted out of an economic necessity for the Institute to produce socially-relevant research (Trist and Murray, 1990). The rebuilding of Britain's industrial base was naturally the main concern of the government in this period and the Tavistock Institute was tasked with developing the productivity of the economy in certain industries. One such project focussed on understanding how, despite the introduction of new methods, coal-mining was not yielding expected results. By comparing high and low-performing mines and by using painstaking ethnographic methods (interviewing workers at home and in pubs after work) it was possible to formulate theories attempting to explain differing outputs (Trist and Bamforth, 1951). Crucially, it was observed that the miners were far more productive and innovative when operating more as self-managing groups than being tied to a Taylorist routine (Pasmore, 2001, p41). There was a direct correlation between the levels of productivity and self-respect the miners felt. What is interesting about this example is how the social outlook of the Tavistock Institute aligned with the prevailing economic and political outlook of the period. Clearly this synchronisation took place in a period of very different social relations to the present time and it is highly logical that this 'type' of AR found a natural home amongst social democratic governments with predominantly nationalised economies. At this stage, AR chimed with the vision of a more democratic or, at the very least, a more 'logical' and 'technical' society where new ideas concerning economic

management and planning (though still within the framework of the capitalist system) were evolving (Hilton *et al*, 2013, pp.7-9).

It is in this environment that the origins of socio-technical systems evolved, the most prominent of which being the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (NIDP) which lay the basis for a whole body of AR literature in management and organisation studies. This research project, which was later to be copied in a number of other countries in varying forms, was based on tripartite sponsorship from trade unions, employer organisations and government (Thorsrud and Emery, 1970). This setup represented the supposed mutual interest of each actor in cooperation rather than conflict and closely represented the German *Mitbeststimmung* (co-determination) system of industrial relations as opposed to, for example, the far more revolutionary concept of *Industrielle Demokratie* outlined by the German Marxist Karl Korsch (1922). At the time, the success of the project appeared to be inconclusive as politics and traditionalism stultified the project's diffusion (Pasmore, 2001, p43). In hindsight, the project has undoubtedly been a success though perhaps not in the way initially imagined by Thorsrud and Emery. Both, however, were concerned that employees would be used merely in the service of a technical as opposed to a socio-technical system, limiting the efficacy of the project (1970, pp.192-193). As Levin and Greenwood (1998, p16) point out, these concerns proved highly perceptive:

> "the basic ideas of the industrial democracy movement are today accepted as state of the art in the organization of work. No sensible industrial leader in the West fails to take account of group-based work organization or the training of skilful and responsible workers able to engage in continuous innovation (improvement) processes at the shop-floor level. These ideas are so widely accepted now that their relatively recent origins in the industrial democracy movement are largely forgotten".

In this respect, from an AR perspective the democratic credentials of the research are central to its success and legitimacy. Furthermore, the perspective of democratising the workplace has also been linked by AR practitioners to the democratisation of society as a whole (Herbst, 1976). Nonetheless, the broad trend in this 'phase' of AR appears to have been to resolve conflict and thus maintain the status quo (Glassman, Erdem and Bartholomew, 2013). In this respect the history of AR research has arguably been separated into two camps; reformist and liberationist. This second 'phase', evolving outside of the traditional Western academic environment and instead largely developing in the context of the socio-political radicalism of Latin America in the 1960's and 70's, focussed on the more far-reaching aims of throwing off

"the intellectual, social, and material shackles of colonialism" (Glassman and Erdem, 2014, pp.207-208). It is also at this stage that AR begins to take on a more participatory and ideological element on the part of the researcher, leading to the evolution of PAR.

The democratic spirit that runs through AR makes it a prime methodology for research addressing the more marginalised sections of society. For this reason AR and PAR, from the 1970's onwards, has had a firm link with education studies, particularly in Latin America. The work of Freire (1970) has been vital to this trend in the literature. A 'progressive educator' in his native Brazil, Freire's main contribution to the literature has been to reaffirm the AR principle of horizontal participation through his notion of 'critical pedagogy'. A major concern of Freire was illiteracy and he worked to establish an educational methodology that would enable people to understand and articulate a critical view of the world (Charles and Ward, 2007). However, to enable this liberation it was vital that oppressed people regained their humanity themselves and not through the action of a well-meaning outsider who imparts knowledge on to them (Freire, 1970, p33). According to Freire, engaging in a "cycle of theory, application, evaluation, reflection, and then back to theory" leads to praxis, which in turn leads to social transformation or "the product of praxis at the collective level" (1970, p75).

The work of Freire undoubtedly allowed a new sphere of 'activist' AR/PAR to grow. As with the birth of AR, this new sphere was born out of a desire to respond to genuine social problems. Central to this was a radical critique of the isolation of academia (indeed many left academia for good in this period) whilst calling for new, critical methodologies that understood the role of ordinary people and that science was "in need of a moral conscience" (Fals Borda, 2001, pp.27-29). On this basis networks of action researchers have continued to develop around the notion of an 'action research movement' (Charles and Ward, 2007, p7). Reflecting the internationalist elements of PAR in particular, many World Congresses have been held since to discuss and debate its future direction. The 1997 Congress, for example, addressed key debates within the PAR field concerning issues of multidisciplinary work and institutional transformation, rigour and validity criteria, creating generalisable projects, the deconstruction of global uniformisations, the relationship between science, education and political action, alleviating conflict, violence and repression and constructing an ethnogenetic and emancipatory ethos (Fals Borda, 2001, pp.33-35). These themes reflect both the broad agenda of AR and the potential progress that can still be made as a methodology and 'philosophy of life'. A more recent example of the constant discussion and evolution implicit

in AR in general can be seen in the emergence of Feminist Action Research (FAR) which argues that, even in a 'liberationist' methodology like PAR, it is necessary to fight against androcentrism and race and gender blindness (Khan and Chovanec, 2010, p38).

Nonetheless, despite its continued development and diverse source base, it is still debatable whether AR has fully 'come in from the cold' (Hall, 2005) and stands as an accepted methodology across the whole of social science. A welcome divergence from this trend comes in the form of van Buuren *et al's* (2015) edited booked concerning AR in the service of climate change adaptation. This is a significant breakthrough in bringing the benefits of AR to a political science audience. The book focuses on one of the key dilemmas of climate change governance: the dual implementation of technical change (specific issues such as raising dykes) with societal change (changing the behaviour patterns of wider society) (van Buuren, van Vliet and Termeer, 2015, p3). Importantly for this paper, the linkage between change and adaptation is conceptualised as a challenge of governance. The crucial lesson to take from the publication of this book is that it is possible to begin to overcome a global issue with ordinary, effected people playing a central role in identifying both the problem and the solution. In this respect the mutual relationship between science and policy that AR can help facilitate is quite clear. However, whilst van Buuren *et al's* book should be welcomed as a breakthrough in bringing AR into a related political science discipline (public administration), there is still a clear need to advocate bringing AR's methods and philosophy into the wider field of political science and, from our perspective, European Studies in particular. In the next section we consider some themes as to why this task has yet to be fully carried out.

Distant relations? Action Research and Political Science

In the all too brief literature review set out above, it would appear that there are a number of themes that AR addresses – such as power, social change and democracy – that fit with political science as a discipline very well. Similarly, like AR, political science also has diverse methodological roots and branches and routinely draws on other social science disciplines. However, despite these factors, it also appears that, with the very notable and recent exception of van Buuren *et al* (2015), political science or its closely associated fields have not attempted to utilise the philosophy and methods of AR. What possible rationale is there for this separation?

Perhaps the most obvious and general conflict between AR and political science (or any discipline where strong methodological and philosophical traditions exist) is that AR and the world of academia itself have always been in conflict to varying degrees. By nature, AR tends to avoid the long-held traditions of social science. Central to this conflict is the way in which AR challenges the traditional notion of the academic expert, instead foregrounding local, 'non-expert' forms of knowledge (Charles and Ward, 2007). Furthermore, the academic's position of authority and control is replaced by participation and collaboration allowing the research participants a full or shared input in the process (Herr and Anderson, 2005). In this sense the problem is largely epistemological. The 'liberationist' school of AR in particular has often been keen to reject or at least strongly question traditional positivist and empiricist methodologies, the elevated position of the academic and the use of 'fashionable' meta-narratives all together, all of which have their place in political science to some extent (Fals Borda, 2001, p28).

In political science there arguably exits an uneasy relationship with the academic's position in the research. This is perhaps best exemplified by the complete absence of the first person in both political science literature and methodology (often to the bewilderment of non-academics). This is justified on the basis that the academic, separated from their 'subject/s' by their expert knowledge, must maintain an objective distance in the name of good and ethical research. Perversely, however, the political scientist will always essentially (though not literally) write in the first person since they are the only eyes through which the research is viewed. Whilst the rationality of academic objectivity is firmly entrenched in political science, it is not beyond criticism. For example, how objective can research really be given all the biases (class, gender, ideological, material interests etc) we consciously or unconsciously hold as social beings? Further, what opportunities for research are being missed in the name of 'objectivity'?

AR (and PAR in particular) turns this debate on its head. Instead of the academic controlling the direction of the research (and consistently coming into conflict with the question of objectivity) it is the 'subjects' who ultimately take the lead. In an instant, the detached academic becomes the involved practitioner and the subject becomes the co-researcher. Rather than being guided by the logic of 'knowledge for the sake of knowing' (the benefits of which are not necessarily diffused to society in general), both sides benefit from the creation

of practical knowledge and solutions to real-world problems. The personal 'biases' and beliefs of the researcher are cancelled out as both parties have a mutual interest in the outcome of the research (i.e. a better society). As such, AR democratises research and rests on a horizontal relationship between participants. This "essentially democratic spirit in social research" has been a feature of AR since the time of Lewin which then and since has consistently "pressed against the boundaries of the prevailing epistemology" calling on the research community to relinquish its "hitherto unchallenged hegemony in the social process of the generation of knowledge about social processes" (Kemmis, 1980).

It is worth noting, however, that academia and AR do not stand in complete opposition. On the contrary, AR has always been greatly *informed* by academia even if some of its more elitist aspects have been wholeheartedly rejected (Fals Borda, 2001, p28). In this sense, AR has established itself as something of a 'third way' between a pure focus on theory or practice. There is an understanding that theory without action is as pointless as practice without understanding (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p2). It is telling that, for example, rather than trail 'the path more trodden' and simply join a university faculty, the likes of Lewin and Trist wanted to create an organisation "that would stand between academia and organizations, acting as a bridge between the two rather than a captive of either... [placing] equal emphasis on the advancement of knowledge and the resolution of practical problems" (Pasmore, 2001, p41).

These issues are expressed philosophically too. Throughout AR there is an ongoing dilemma over where AR should be 'positioned'; is AR an evolution of Renaissance modernism and the values of practical philosophy (Toulmin, 1990), an outright postmodern/poststructuralist methodology (Brown and Jones, 2001), or something in between (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, pp.6-7)? Of course, the diverse origins of AR mean that researchers are not necessarily forced to take a position on this question. You do not have to be a fully-fledged postmodernist to question the permanence of the expert as knowledge creator, for example. This fluidity that is central to the AR philosophy is undoubtedly one of its strengths but may also be a source of its absence from some of the more traditional areas of the social sciences.

Within this wider issue of the role of the expert there are other themes that challenge traditional social science methodologies and philosophies. These themes are reflective of the challenge that the 'liberationist' school of AR faced from the 1970's onwards in establishing a counter-lever to traditional academia (Fals Borda, 2001, pp.29-31). The first of these

themes is the role of science, knowledge and reason. As Fals Borda (2001, p29) points out, much of AR argues that science, knowledge and reason are socially constructed and should be utilised not just for abstract purposes but for worthy social causes. In this respect there is a fundamental desire to converge popular and academic thought for the benefit of society as a whole. This is one of the guiding principles of AR. This involves a fundamental questioning of the institutions of science and academia holding the monopoly over the knowledge-making process (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p2). The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is rejected in favour of the pursuit of *action* towards a better world.

This leads on to the second theme outlined by Fals Borda which concerns the boundaries between theory and practice. The key division between AR and traditional social science in this respect is the rejection of academic value-neutrality which has the potential to maintain the status quo (Fals Borda, 2001, p29). Indeed, Greenwood and Levin (1998, p9) argue that this aspect of AR is what appeals to many academics who "come [to AR] in reaction to their unsatisfying experiences of the abstractions and social passivity of their home fields". A secondary aspect of the theory-practice debate is the 'direction' from which theory is derived. Unsurprisingly, as a general rule AR rejects the separation of theory from practice seen in a great deal of social science research (as well as the greater value given to theory) and instead prioritises practice with theory developing out of practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011, p11).

How then does the building of theories, of general over specific patterns (a key concern of political science) take place given the reliance on 'local' data inherent in AR? Gustavsen (2008, pp.431-435) highlights that the general rule set out above is not as enshrined in AR as it may seem and has in fact developed in line with certain 'phases'. The initial phase of AR, for example, was still largely based on traditional, applied methodologies which took a deductive approach (thanks in part to AR's social psychology base at that stage). Since this phase, AR research has gradually become more and more inductive. In the second and third phases, AR has moved from a basis of being used to diffuse theory to being used to create theory. The more recent examples of AR thus tend to concern how specific cases can be broadened out as a means of developing general patterns of change (Gustavsen, 2008, p432). Nonetheless, the principle of 'practice over theory' has remained throughout every phase of AR.

One final issue highlighted by Fals Borda concerns the relationship between subject and object. Once again, in line with its position on the role of the expert in research, such divisions are rejected in AR:

> "it seemed counterproductive for our work to regard the researcher and the researched, the 'experts' and the 'clients' or 'targets' as two discrete, discordant or antagonistic poles. Rather, we had to consider them as real 'thinking-feeling persons' ('sentipesantes') whose diverse views on the shared life experience should be taken jointly into account". (Fals Borda, 2001, p30)

It goes without saying therefore that the intended relationship between researcher and the researched in AR is to be entirely horizontal (Heller, 1989). Social change is not observed, it is actively promoted with the researcher acting as a central component of the research itself as an 'organic intellectual' (Fals Borda, 2001, p31). Perhaps the only thing that separates the academic and the research participants are the specific research skills of the academic themselves. Otherwise, relationships and objectives are entirely synchronised.

It is these three themes that have arguably posed the largest boundaries to AR becoming an accepted political science methodology. All of the above issues challenge to lesser or greater extents the more traditional aspects of social science, with political science appearing to be one of the slowest to move towards an 'action agenda'. However, there could be other, less philosophical reasons why AR remains outside the boundaries of political science that are worth considering. Firstly, there is the 'marketisation' of education. As funding to research and higher education in general faces increasing market pressures (such as spending cuts in many social science fields and the foregrounding of more 'economically valuable' fields outside of the social sciences), there are undoubtedly far fewer opportunities to carry out new, 'experimental' forms of research. As Marshall (1999, 158) points out, research is an inherently political process with decisions over who researches what and how being taken with these factors in mind. This pressurises academics towards orthodoxy and tradition, knowing that funding (and therefore career prospects) can be dependent upon fulfilling certain research criteria of which AR is less likely to be one (2001, p339). Another inter-related factor is that AR can undoubtedly be labour-intensive. As with any form of participant observation (and particularly a form as in-depth as AR), the researcher must commit to the "hard, systematic work that ethnography requires" (Gillespie and Michelson, 2011, p263). This type of work therefore could appear intimidating to funding bodies.

Conclusions

The issues set out above are intended to give some possible explanations as to why AR has yet to become integrated into political science as an accepted methodology. Alternatively however, there are many more reasons why AR *should* become an accepted political science methodology. Thankfully, with the publishing of van Buuren *et al's* (2015) book addressing the use of AR in the service of Climate Change adaptation, it seems that a breakthrough has been made. Nonetheless, it is arguably the only significant work from a related field of political science at the present time. The question therefore is what could AR bring to political science in general and European studies specifically?

The overlap between 'action' and 'impact' is something that is central to each of our research interests. Indeed, perhaps the most important element that AR can bring to political science is that it fits very well with the ever-increasing pressure for universities to fulfil an 'impact' agenda. Though this agenda is highly contested amongst academics in general, the importance of it for the current and future direction of research is unavoidable even if its 'character' is very worthy of debate. Each of the cases cited in this paper undoubtedly have the potential to address the issue of impact.

In the case of trade unions, PAR could hold the key to unearthing new and insightful data concerning emerging labour movement formulations. Since the onset of the global financial crisis, resistance to the austerity agenda set out by the vast majority of European governments has seen the 'sleeping giant' of the labour movement reawaken to varying degrees, hinting at the potential for a very different conception of Europe to emerge if similar movements are replicated across the continent. For academics who are also trade unionists, this raises the question of how we can engage with and contribute to these new developments. If, as many suspect (e.g. Della Porta, 2015), the struggle to implement or reject austerity will be the defining political issue of our time, then academics can play a key role in analysing and developing the many new social movements that will emerge in the coming period. PAR can help this process by bringing the researcher and the researched onto an equal playing field in their relationship and purpose. By working with trade union activists it would be possible to

understand far better the methods of influence used by trade unions and how their influence (or lack of it) can be nurtured and/or improved.

In the case of the ECV, the potential for academic impact lies in the researcher's position of advising the Chair and member organisations on the direction of the network's formation and development, specifically, its formalization and institutionalization at EU level as a health policy actor. By utilising the methods of PAR, it would be possible to assess the efficacy of the ECV's methods from a very different angle to more established political science methodologies. Furthermore, by analysing the formation of networks such as the ECV 'up close', this data would also contribute to academic and policy-relevant data concerning the formation, composition and relations between similar organisations.

In the case of UACES, adopting an AR method to analyse the history of UACES and of ES in the UK provides a unique opportunity to grasp the human and social impact of policy decisions relating to higher education, and the role of a subject association in mediating this impact. At a time of acute turbulence in the UK-EU relationship – with a 'Brexit' a real possibility by 2017 -  understanding this impact and its likely repercussions on the engagement in the 'in-out' referendum that can be expected on the part of interested academics, students and HE institutions appears to be a valuable import from the register of AR.

AR, if funded and understood correctly, could prove to be a very successful method of democratising the link between academia and wider society. Furthermore, AR allows researchers a greater role and stake in their research in contrast to other, more traditional, 'impact' roles. Instead of researchers merely being consulted or asked for information by practitioners who can then use the information as they see fit, the action researcher (as a practitioner) can have a *direct* impact through their research (Huntjens *et al*, 2015, p27). Of course, this does not necessarily overcome the issue of *who* decides what constitutes 'impact' but it could be an important step in democratising the research process in political science. This would also allow political science to branch out to new groups in society who traditionally have been ignored or bypassed by academia to directly participate in and benefit from social change.

Another positive aspect that AR could bring to political science is that it would give political scientists greater freedom to pursue their own political activism in conjunction with good research. In this respect, any number of interesting case studies could emerge through political scientists utilising their connections with social movements, political networks, community groups and many other forms. Far from compromising the integrity of the research, the political activism of the researcher would offer new avenues of research with extremely detailed ethnographic data. In fact, AR could greatly enhance similar research approaches such as case study research and ethnography as it is a far more integrated methodology (Huntjens *et al*, 2015, p22). The great benefit of AR as a methodology is its fluidity whilst still maintaining a central purpose: the improvement of individual lives and of society in general. By bringing this methodology into political science, there is a huge potential to democratise research in this field and develop new and exciting links between academia and wider society that should be further explored. On this basis political science can contribute to changing society as much as it contributes to understanding it.

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