

Action Research with Impediments

A social temporal analysis of a project
that was interrupted for (not so) obvious reasons¹

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Point of departure

In this paper we tell a story about what in the mid 1990s happened to an action plan that was conceived according to an action research strategy. The objective of the plan was to improve the situation for the municipality of Ronneby³ and its citizens.

Our story sets off on the level of events, actions and agencies and here our story is simple and straightforward. Then we consider the structural level and begin to deliberate how the two levels interact. From then on our story develops into a social temporal analysis of the rather complicated relationship between action research approaches and such particular forms of social research that aim at policies for local and regional economic growth.

Research problem and research questions

Let us however begin with the action research approach. There are different schools within this field.⁴ We agree, though, with Greenwood & Levin that action research in principle "is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organisation or community seeking to improve their situation." We also agree with their statement that action research "promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders".⁵

On the other hand, Greenwood & Levin also assert that action research "rests on the belief and experience that all people – professional action researchers included – accumulate, organize, and use complex knowledge constantly in everyday life".⁶ We do not disagree with this latter statement, but we argue that it is necessary to enquire about how "all people accumulate, organize and use complex knowledge constantly in everyday life". What complex knowledge is it that all people accumulate, organize and use constantly in everyday life? And, above all,

¹ This paper constitutes a small part of a larger Norwegian-Swedish research program aiming at taking a closer look at mechanisms for local and regional development. One of the projects within the program focuses on comparisons of developmental processes from the mid 1980s to the present in the three municipalities of Ronneby and Karlskrona in Sweden, and Horten in Norway. The rationale for these comparisons is that in all of them old smoke stack industries were shut down from the end of the 1970s and small and medium sized ICT-enterprises started to mushroom from the mid 1980s.

² The authors of this paper are both by profession historians, Stranne as lecturer and Uhlin as guest-professor at Blekinge Institute of Technology. Both of them lived in Ronneby and took part in the events that are discussed in this paper. Stranne still lives in Ronneby. Uhlin now lives in the nearby (26 km) town of Karlskrona.

³ Situated in county Blekinge at the south-east corner of Sweden. The municipality and the town have the same name. Population 30 000 whereof 15 000 in the town.

⁴ For instance Whyte, W. F. (ed.); *Participatory Action Research*, Sage 1991.

⁵ Greenwood, D. & Levin, M.; *Introduction to Action Research. Social Research for Social Change*, Sage Publications 1998, p. 4

⁶ Ibid.

what kind of social temporality is hidden in the concept of "constantly"? These are the overarching research questions we will discuss in connection with the events and structures we will describe and discuss.

Thus, the research problem we will investigate is the following: Time is often regarded as something natural, given, and therefore unproblematic. But there are different kinds of time, such as, on the one hand, physical time or clock-time, and on the other a wide range of so called anthropological times, e.g. biological time and subjective time. Historical time, or simply *history*, is then a particular subjective temporal structuration of past actions and events that has to be understood as something else than what, in all its infinite complexity, has "objectively" happened in past time.¹ What is more, all these different kinds of time in a way correspond to experiences that all people – and to paraphrase Greenwood & Levin – constantly accumulate, organize, and use as complex knowledge in their everyday life. This means, that times in the form of people's memories and experiences are stacked upon each other in what Reinhart Koselleck has called *Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*, the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous.² That is "all people" are "constantly", i.e. simultaneously, coping with what Koselleck furthermore calls a "space of experience" (*Erfahrungsraum*) and a "horizon of expectation" (*Entwartungshorizont*).³

What is more, time is also an important aspect of one of the most thoroughly discussed matters within European⁴ sociology namely how the two concepts of agency and structure are related and how they interact. That is, we will approach the matter of agency and structure from a social temporal perspective, which directs our attention towards Anthony Giddens's structuration theory⁵ and especially Reinhart Koselleck's ideas about events (and therefore also agency and actions) and structures in historical time.⁶ A few introductory words about some key concepts are necessary.

There are several obvious connections between event and structure, but there is nevertheless a conceptual difference between them: their respectively temporal breadths are not congruent. The before and after an event encompass its temporal qualities, which means that events can be remembered and narrated. Social structures on the other hand can empirically be revealed only as long as their extensiveness does not exceed the memory of a contemporary generation. But social structures have longer extensiveness than that, which means that they remain unconscious and unknown; their changes are so slow that they normally escape all sorts of attention. To detect and explain such historical structures was both the challenge and the achievement of the *Annales*-school that emerged in France in the 1930s.⁷ It is quite clear, on the other hand, that social structures are formed by individual events, actions, and agencies, which in turn happen under the influence of such structures.⁸

¹ Koselleck, R.; *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Stanford University Press 2002; Koselleck, R.; *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Columbia University Press 2004; Giddens, A.; *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Polity Press 1984; see also for instance Jenkins, K.; *Re-thinking History*, Routledge 1991, and Lundmark, L.; *Tidens gång & tidens värde*, Författarförlaget Fischer & Rye 1989.

² Koselleck 2004.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Within American sociology the tendency is, on the other hand, to discuss micro and macro aspects of the society (Ritzer, G.; *Sociological Theory*, Third Ed., McGraw Hill 1992, p. 567.

⁵ Giddens 1984.

⁶ Koselleck 2002, 2004.

⁷ E.g. Burke, P.; *Annales skolan. En introduktion*, Daidalos 1992.

⁸ Koselleck 2004.

Anthony Giddens deals with this interplay in his structuration theory: "The basic domain of the study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across time and space".¹ Thus, the core of the structuration theory is the duality and dialectical interplay of agency and structure, the one cannot be conceived of apart from the other. We will come back to this, because much more has to be said about this interplay, but so far our point is this: The close relation between agency/action/event on the one hand and structure on the other must not be allowed to suppress the differences between them, because these differences have the epistemological assignment to reveal the many layers of history, i.e. the many layers of time.² In the Ronneby case this assignment will soon be obvious when we will tell the story of what happened in Ronneby from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s.

Ronneby 1984 – 1995

The deep industrial crisis that hit many places in Sweden during the first half of the 1980s also severely battered Ronneby. In 1984 the crisis made the municipality board of Ronneby take a new comprehensive decision for its trade and industry policy. The importance of traditional big scale manufacturing industry was fading away. Well known industries like Ericson, Kockum and Facit Halda cut down their numbers of employees. Thousands of workers lost their jobs. Ronneby with 30 000 inhabitants lost about 3000 industry jobs during the first half of the 1980s. The traditional space of experience was cracking apart; beliefs in a new big scale industrial expansion had to be abandoned. Growth among diversified small and medium sized enterprises seemed to be a more realistic horizon of expectation. The municipality board, since the 1920s dominated by the Social Democratic Party, in 1984 decided on a new policy that was in favor of local private trade and industry expansion.³ One has to realize, though, that the development and implementation of the new policies was a walk on a tight-rope with regard to the core voters of the Social Democratic Party, i.e. members of the Metal Worker's Union.

This was however also the period of a new industrial era that began in the mid 1980s around the new digital information technology. The new especially seemed to emanate from a growing software engineering and telecom service sector.⁴ This was observed by the political leadership of Ronneby more or less by chance. The brother of the head financial manager in the Town Hall was the Dean of Engineering Faculty at Stanford University and former head of Xerox research department in Palo Alto; he strongly advised a small group from Ronneby on a study tour to Silicon Valley not to go in for hardware production firms but for software companies. Thus, in 1986 the municipality board of Ronneby decided to create a research and enterprise park in order to provide appropriate premises for software production for small companies in the IT service sector. Moreover, in 1989, after much political lobbying in Stockholm, a new university college with one campus located in Ronneby was established in Blekinge. Soon the idea of the research and enterprise park grew to a concept containing advanced collaboration between the private IT service sector, the municipality and higher education and research – the Soft Center of Ronneby.⁵ Gradually it was designed and performed

¹ Giddens 1984, p.:2.

² Koselleck 2004, p 105-114.

³ Ronneby municipality, Council minute, § 109, 25 June 1984.

⁴ Nilsson, J.-E.; *The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Systems. A Nordic Perspective*. Copenhagen Business School Press, 2006.

⁵ Interview 13 Dec. 2006 with Roland Andersson

due to a practice that was known from other countries and which some years later was labeled the Triple Helix model.¹

Soft Center reached a high national and international reputation especially during the mid 1990s. The Ronneby campus got to be known as Sweden's best IT programming school.² In 1994 the Soft Center Foundation was rewarded the Chester Carlson's (founder of Xerox) price for "stimulating use of information technology, working out a model for bridging geographical obstacles and bringing about renewal within trade and industry".³ Ronneby was also mentioned as one of Europe's top ten IT-cities according to a report of the European Digital Cities Project, published in 1998. The collaboration between municipality, BIT and the approximately 60 private IT companies at the Center worked as a regional growth booster.⁴

All these changes in Ronneby within just a few years did not only cause pride and self-respect but also social unrest, uncertainties, and tensions. On the one side the closure of some of the major work places with widespread redundancies as a consequence, and, on the other side, the emergence of Soft Center with not only high tech companies and higher education and research *per se*, but with more and more people moving in, people with different kinds of lifestyles and worldviews, and with money to buy the best properties in Ronneby along the river and by the sea. The sociologist Magnus Karlsson has analyzed how frustrating life was for a family in this time gap between the disappearance of the old industrial Ronneby and the coming of the IT-dominated Ronneby; the retired grandfather, with his social norms and values formed during a long working life as a metalworker, the middle aged father, now an unemployed and aggravated ex metal worker with small chances, if any at all, to ever get a new job, and the son with plans to leave his hometown for higher education anywhere but in Ronneby.⁵

This industrial and structural change that hit not only Ronneby but many other places, regions, and nations, has been called "the third industrial revolution". Not really because old industries were shut down and new ones appeared, but primarily because industry work changed character; information and communication technology (ICT) rapidly became the nucleus of a new industrial paradigm that implied not long but short series, not stable product mixes but flexible, not standardisation but customization, not stock-keeping but "just in time", and so forth. It soon became apparent that this industrial revolution was not limited to industries and industrial production but it affected the society in general.⁶ That is, this revolution caused social structural changes that in turn were both the causes and the effects of countless individual events and actions, also in Ronneby.

We have to ask, though, what kind of concept "revolution" really is? It changed its meaning during the 18th century: from a revolving and circular movement (lat. *revolutio*) to its modern meaning of a major, often in one way or the other violent or forceful, structural change implying a before and an after. This modern meaning comes close to the concept of "crisis". Indeed, there are good reasons to use these two concepts as analytical tools about the Ronneby case. For instance, the concept of revolution in the notion of a third industrial revolution in Ronneby contains much more about general structural changes than the usual notion of a para-

¹ Etzkowitz, H. & Leydesdorff, L. *The Triple Helix as a Model for Innovation Studies* (Conference Report), *Science & Public Policy*, Vol. 25(3) (1998) 195-203.

² Örnköldsviks *Allehanda* 13 Dec. 2005.

³ <http://www.iva.se/templates/Page.aspx?id=176>, 6 July 2007.

⁴ Alsén et al, *The University – A Regional Booster?* 1999.

⁵ Karlsson, M.; *Från Jernverk till Hjärnbruk*. Diss. Lund 2000.

⁶ Magnusson, L.; *Den tredje industriella revolutionen*. Prisma Abetslivsinstitutet 1999.

digim shift from one dominant form of production to another. Moreover, we have already in our short introduction showed that our case is loaded with all sorts of crises, both on the structural and on the agency levels. The two concepts of crisis and revolution are closely related, and not the least through a common temporal feature.

"Crisis" is derived from the Greek *krinō* which means to cut, to select, to decide, to judge, which was originally aimed at a definitive, irrevocable decision that led to success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, salvation or damnation. In ancient times it was a concept "that always posited a temporal dimension, which, parsed in modern terms actually implied a theory of time"¹, because it pointed toward the pressure of time, i.e. the small time gap between past time and future time when a decisive decision is taken.

Koselleck has presented three semantic models of the concept of crisis, of which one is of particular interest to us. "Crisis", he says,

"can characterize a singular, accelerating process in which many conflicts, bursting the system apart, accumulate so as to bring about a new situation after the crisis has passed. However, the concept indicates the crossing of an epochal threshold, a process that can repeat itself *mutatis mutandis*. Even if history always remains unique in individual cases, the concept of "crisis" indicates to the possibility that the thrust of change can take place in analogous forms".²

The meaning of "analogous forms" thus is that although history always remains unique in individual cases any crisis-like change has forms that are similar, corresponding, comparable, and/or related to structures of other crisis-like changes. This idea of Koselleck is parallel to his idea that revolutions basically have very similar structural patterns. That is, even if individual revolutionaries for instance do and say things that are unique

"yet the very circumstances under which this uniqueness presents itself are themselves in no way new. There are structures that endure and there are processes that persist: both necessitate and outlast the respective individual events in which history itself takes place. In other words, there are different velocities of change".³

Now, these analytical tools as such cause new questions: What kind of analogous forms of crises were there in Ronneby on the structural levels beside the uniquely individual actions and events? And what was the significance of these forms? We can furthermore ask what the space of experience was like, and if this space was compatible or not with the horizon of expectation that was opened up by various events, actions and agencies? Or were there many different and incompatible spaces of experiences and horizons of expectation? And last, but not least, what was the situation for the action research project in this battle zone between perhaps conflicting velocities of change? However, we cannot answer these questions before we have finished our story.

So, just about ten years after the new trade and industry program of 1984 the municipality board took another comprehensive decision based on a report written by the two researchers,

¹ Koselleck 2002, p. 237.

² Ibid. p. 240.

³ Koselleck 2002, p. 135.

Peter Stevrin and Åke Uhlin, at the University College in Ronneby.¹ Before the decision the commissioner, Mr. Roland Andersson, addressed the board with a memo in which he made the prognosis that IT would become “the basic technology for the whole public economy for the future”.² This prognosis of his was in full accord with a similar statement he used to make in discussions with local people as well as when he talked to visiting national politicians: The time is gone, he used to say, when Ronneby could make a living out of "bending and pressing sheet metal".³ Thus, based on the two researcher's report the municipality board in June 1993 unanimously agreed on a development program for the next ten years - Project 2003.

It seems quite clear that around 1992-93 there was a general consent within the municipality board that a new societal horizon of expectation was opening up in connection with the rapidly emerging "IT society" and that the traditional space of experience in Ronneby had to be abandoned. People in general in Ronneby, however, did not yet share the politicians' confidence, and they did not seem to be that impressed by the Soft Center as a representation of the future. But the municipality board was resolved to change these attitudes and in a CD about Project 2003 that was later distributed the board stated that

...the traditional industrial community of Ronneby should have changed to a complete information technology community by the year of 2003. Ronneby will become the “Soft Center of Sweden”. The objective is to build a local information society where the new technique will become every citizen's property and a democratic right.⁴

In front of unemployed metal workers it was no easy task for the social democratic political leadership, to defend the considerable investments in Soft Center.⁵ The political challenge was to achieve a local mobilization around the strategy for the future, including further public investments in the growing service industry sector.⁶ The all in all decisive issue was that the core of the blue collar workers kept their trust in their party's politics. That is, the ongoing transformation from a traditional industrial community to an ICT society needed political support from the aging exponents of the industrial society.

Thus, in November 1992 Stevrin and Uhlin had been asked by the commissioner, Mr. Andersson, to investigate about different measures to encourage “a spirit of enterprise” in Ronneby. Half a year later, in April 1993, Stevrin and Uhlin suggested a number of concrete measures (and here it is important to remember that what today smells old hat in 1993 was considered to be new and quite radical ideas):

- The public schools should be equipped with computers, and be connected to each other in local networks
- BIT students should teach teachers in the comprehensive schools how to use computers.
- The public library should be upgraded with computers and network connections. A concept of a “Library of the Future” was formulated

¹ Both researchers, Peter Stevrin and Åke Uhlin, had recently moved to the University College in Ronneby from a management consultancy in Stockholm. In this consultancy firm action research was not only in the professional focus, and with Donald Schön and Chris Argyris as household names, but in 1985 Schön was also invited to the company where he ran a series of lectures, seminars and training activities for the consultants.

² Roland Andersson,, "Om Ronneby's framtida utveckling", memo 1993.

³ Recollection, Åke Uhlin.

⁴ CD-ROM-presentation of "Project 2003", 1994.

⁵ Jan Hinderesson, Sydöstran 10 Dec. 2002.

⁶ See Alsén, G. & Nilsson, A., "Den kommunala handlingsrepertoaren" in Melin et al. 1984, p. 90.

- When renovated with public funding "stupid houses" should be transformed into "intelligent houses", i.e. equipped with broadband connection
- Fiber optics cables should make connections possible between Soft Center, municipal administrations and local trade and industry
- Ronneby should be made a national "test bed" for development projects within industry and public administration.
- Researchers and students should be stimulated to participate in local development work (action research).
- The citizens of Ronneby should actively be confronted with all the new options that the new technology could offer, for instance within the fields of culture and geriatric care.
- In order to make the Project come true the municipality should invest 10 Mil. SEK for a period of ten years.¹

The action plan Project 2003 that was unanimously supported by the municipality executive board was almost a copy of the researchers' report, and most of the plan was realized or started within little more than a year. Actually, both researchers were surprised at the speed which most of the recommendations were carried through. At the same time they both understood that the action research idea that leaven all through their report was not comprehended by various groups of actors. To start with, the two researchers took it for granted that the report immediately should be made public. This was not the case. Stevrin and Uhlin had to convince the political leadership that, for instance, the leading civil servants of the municipality should be summoned to a couple of seminars where the ideas behind the Project could be discussed, and, if necessary, explained and perhaps even modified. However, after some discussions the seminars were organized. At the seminars the two researchers were met with a certain amount of skepticism just because neither their report nor the board's plan had been distributed. The aforementioned CD containing information about Project 2003 was distributed much later.²

And the same thing happened again when teachers from the secondary schools of Ronneby, and again on the initiative of Stevrin and Uhlin, were invited to seminars about in what way computers could be utilized in the classroom. It was anticipated that school teachers should show some doubts against computers; teachers are supposed to be sensitive with regard to their teaching methods. But it was more than that, it was also about uncertainty regarding the whole situation: Was this really the right things to do when unemployment among the industry workers in the municipality reached unprecedented heights? When the teachers at the seminars were informed about Project 2003 a common reaction was that this might be good for "the computer people out at the Soft Center", but was the plan really something for the schools and the citizens of Ronneby?³

Hence, despite a lot of uncertainty and hesitance most of Project 2003 was realized. Cooperation and development projects according to the action plan consistently followed what was a couple of years later even in Ronneby known as the "Triple Helix model", i.e. where municipality, university and private businesses collaborated. There is however no doubt about the fact that the municipality so far was the leading local actor. The municipality's actions

¹ Stevrin, P. & Uhlin, Å.; *Ronneby – Sveriges Soft Center. En PM om en utvecklingsidé för Ronneby kommun* . Report April 1993 to Ronneby municipality .

² Interview 5 June 2007 with Peter Stevrin, and recollections by Åke Uhlin.

³ Ibid..

worked as an economic lubricant for cooperation between engaged private IT-companies and the university.¹

Less than two years after Stevrin's and Uhlin's report, and the launching of Project 2003, the two researchers were commissioned to investigate steps and measures to further involve local citizens in the IT development process. Again, the most important purposes were to strengthen the local mobilization for the growing IT society. And again it was Mr. Andersson, the municipality commissioner, who pressed on, and who personally took the contact with the two researchers. The point of departure this time was what Stevrin and Uhlin in their first report had said about the need of a "mental structural change".

In December 1994 Stevrin and Uhlin presented *The Second Step*. They opened with a commentary on the fact that the local community the 21 November had been hit by what the media soon called "The Ronneby Scandal".² The local press day after day reported the Town Hall executives and officials seemed to be involved in economic irregularities, the police made enquiries and the public prosecution authority soon decided to charge the Head for Building and Construction, who was also one of the two leading managers of Soft Center, with fraudulence. The commissioner, Mr. Andersson, was soon judicially cleared, but he was immediately politically out in the cold and was forced to resign from his post as chairman of the local party organization. According to one of the two local morning papers for Mr. Andersson this was like being forced to sneak out through the backdoor "for the most able and successful commissioner in Blekinge this decade"³ For Mr. Andersson this was obviously a case of guilt by association, and it needs a few comments before we continue with Stevrin's and Uhlin's second report.

Mr. Roland Andersson and the two leading managers of Soft Center had been extraordinarily successful with their Soft Center creation. National and international acclaims and awards, the establishment of a Soft Center in Dulluth in the USA, ongoing negotiations of another Soft Center in Berlin, plus a couple of planned Soft Centers in other places in Sweden. One of the two managers bought himself a British racing green Jaguar E-type, and Roland Andersson bought himself a used BMW 635 Ci from one of the company CEOs at Soft Center. This was observed in Ronneby as something that Thorstein Veblen once had called "conspicuous consumption".⁴ What is more, the owner of the local congress hotel renamed the veranda of the hotel restaurant to "Chez Roland". On top of this Mr. Andersson was an enthusiastic golfer in one of the truest blue collar municipalities in Sweden. All of this did not pass unnoticed and uncommented, and rumors that had been circulating for a long time that something was rotten "out there at the Soft Center" at the end of November 1994 accelerated beyond reason.⁵

Aware of all of this the two researchers a couple of weeks later opened up their second report by referring to the French historian Fernand Braudel's famous metaphor and conception of "la longue durée", i.e. that events and incidents take place on the surface of the ocean of time while mental and structural changes has to be seen as results of very slow changes deep down.

¹ Interview 8 June 2006 with Jan Anders Palmqvist, municipality commissioner of Ronneby from 1995 and still acting .

² Sydöstran 21 Nov 1994 and Blekinge Läns "Tidning 21 and 22 Nov. 1994.

³ Sydöstran 27 Nov. 1994.

⁴ Veblen, T.; *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Transaction Publishers 1899/1992.

⁵ The Town Hall's manager for building and construction was also responsible for all the building activities at Soft Center. In April 1997 he was sentenced to prison for one year for having accepted bribes from a construction firm and breach of trust committed by an agent on his principal, i.e. the municipality of Ronneby. Ronneby tingsrätt, Mål nr B 213/94, 29 April 1997.

The message to the new political leadership was of course not to fall into paralysis because of the “scandal”. The long term strategic work in changing mental, social and economic local structures must not fade away because of incidents on the “surface of time”.

However, while the first report (1993) very much was characterized by its concrete material recommendations the second report (1994) aimed at mentalities, attitudes and ideological doctrine. Consequently the new report was political compared to the first one. For instance, an important theoretical component in the second report originated from Robert Reich's *The Work of Nations* (1993). Development of a new and different society was predicted, socially and economically. Companies should and would give priority to high value rather than high volume. Standard production procedure and repetitive assignments would be reduced dramatically and new categories of work force would raise – problem identifiers, problem solvers and strategic coordinators. According to Reich these categories of “symbol analytics” tended to constitute new privileged elites capable of a standard of living and social status far above traditional groups of industrial workers. Beside economic and social polarization the American experience was geographical segregation with symbol analytic activities concentrated to certain regions. Stevrin's and Uhlin's conclusions were dramatic:

Not only traditional jobs will disappear, but the idea itself about jobs. And it will vanish like a species of animal who has survived its evolutionary time. Jobs will not remain as part of tomorrow's reality. But at the same time there will always be a lot of work to be done, but that kind of work will not be an element within the today's category of “job”. In fact many companies today already are getting rid of the jobs in the traditional sense.¹

Accordingly Stevrin and Uhlin recommended the municipality to become a “free zoon and a test bed” for new and different solutions for the interplay between employers and employees on the labor market. There was also a recommendation to establish a “pact of research and development” between the Town Hall and the University College.

Furthermore the Town Hall was recommended to establish a center for simulated local social development decisions. The idea was to create a virtual milieu where public decision makers could get practice and coaching in order to approve a better understanding for complex real world causal relations. Such a management simulator would have potential for being a national pilot project which would attract professional decision makers from all over the country. Other municipalities would be invited to participate in development work and realizations of different simulations.

There should also be arranged a “Come-together-party” in order to bring significant people together, such as business executives who had recently moved into the municipality and local decision makers. This would be an important contribution in creating a social and organizational infrastructure, essential for the improvement of a successful local development and growth.² Other suggestions concerned setting up a “youth parliament” with some rights for the young members to decide in certain economic issues, experiments with new forms of direct democracy based on IT, and efforts to make unemployed youth become “IT pioneers”.³

¹ Stevrin, P. & Uhlin, Å.; "Det andra steget" . Report December 1994, The Archives of Ronneby municipality.

² The concept of "partnership" was not yet *en vogue*, but the general idea of this recommendation was along the partnership idea of today.

³ This idea was inspired by the extremely successful Danish system with "chaos pilots".

Hence, the recommendations of the second report were both extensive and audacious. They could be apprehended provocatively by politicians and other decision makers. Creating a management simulator for public decision makers could implicate a lack of consciousness among politicians about societal causes and effects. The suggested model of the municipality as a free zone and a test bed for alternative forms of employment could be seen as a provocation towards current laws and agreements on the labor market. Electronic direct democracy experiments could implicate serious imperfections within the traditional system of local representative democracy. Thus, the report's recommendations contained a substantial amount of indirect criticisms against current structures in general. The recommendations could especially be apprehended as provocations against the left wing of the traditional Labor Movement and the Social Democratic Party.

The scene at large in Sweden at the end of 1994 was characterized by uncertainty. The right wing alliance had lost the general election in September and left behind an unprecedented national debt. Although the Social Democrats had won the election on "an open mandate to refinance the national budget" open revolt broke out within the party when cuts in the social security system were announced and the employment safety laws were loosened. Party members said they did no longer recognize their party. In northern Sweden party members started an open rebellion against their own Government ("Dalaupproret"). Critics within the party said that the Government's policies were rightist. There were also spiteful opinions towards everything that could be interpreted as economic speculation – "yuppie economics". Some people said that greed had been elevated to norm. Opinions like these on the national level of course also influenced the political climate in Ronneby. The media was on red alert.

On the other hand, in the fall of 1994 software for a management simulator for public use was developed at Soft Center. The Naval Base in Karlskrona had made the commission and a substantial development program had been carried through. The military applications were of course not available, but the software was for civilian applications. Ronneby could be the first municipality with advanced simulations of planning for housing, healthcare and so forth. Moreover, electronic direct democracy was a hot topic in many countries in the mid 1990s, and the issue of finding and defining the new jobs, including alternative forms of employment, was, and still is, on the top of the political agenda. So, yes, the second report was radical, and the two researchers realized that it even in some ways could be perceived as provocative, but they argued that the new technology offered new opportunities to exploit and if not Ronneby did so someone else would.

However, the very first recommendation of the report was: "This report ought to be delivered to all concerned in the municipality". That is, this was a lesson from the reaction of the first report: No one outside the highest echelon of the (social democratic) political life in Ronneby (including less than a handful of high positioned civil servants) had actually seen and read the first report until the CD-ROM about Project 2003 much too late was produced. A lot of physical actions followed after the first report, yes, but there were very few broad and collective actions besides what the two researchers themselves started on their own initiatives. Activities like these had to be multiplied as a consequence of the second report, that was the central idea, and a prerequisite for that was that the report should be distributed all over Ronneby. As has been indicated above the second report was however more or less immediately buried in the archives of the municipality. The only visible result of the second report was the establishment of a "youth parliament" with responsibility for a couple of less significant music arrangements.

It is important to remember, though, that both reports had been initiated by Mr. Roland Andersson when he was still both chairman of the local social democratic party organization and the municipal commissioner. But when the second report was finished and presented in December 1994 he had recently retired with the intention that he would be able to concentrate more wholeheartedly on developing Soft Center. But the scandal immediately forced him to resign from the former position and the second scheme was never realized. Mr. Andersson, very much the creator of Soft Center and the Ronneby success, was thus pushed aside and deprived of all influence in spite of the fact that he was totally cleared by the police and public prosecutor. It is easy to think of "guilt by association" as the prime reason for what happened to him. But, as we will soon see, this is a far too shallow explanation. Anyway, the social democrat Mr. Jan Anders Palmqvist succeeded Andersson as the new municipal commissioner.

As a consequence of "The Ronneby Scandal" the local politicians as well as the IT services sector and Soft Centre – especially where public interests were involved – were discredited by the local opinion. Political connections with private trade and industry, especially within the IT sector at Soft Centre, were seen with suspicion, and the new municipal leadership avoided Soft Center as much as possible. Withdrawal from the triple helix became the chief strategy in order to reestablish trust and confidence for local politics and municipal activities.

Discussion and conclusions

We have now completed our story about events and social structures in Ronneby till the beginning of 1995. What happened after that we will save for an epilogue in an attempt not to let the results of these events and structures too much influence our discussion and conclusions.

Before we go further into this discussion it might however be wise to give a reminder of our research questions: Against the background of Greenwood's and Levin's assertion that action research "rests on the belief and experience that all people – professional action researchers included – accumulate, organize, and use complex knowledge constantly in everyday life",¹ we formulated two overarching research questions: What kind of complex knowledge is it that all people accumulate, organize and use constantly in everyday life? And, above all, what kind of social temporality is hidden in the concept of "constantly"?

Along our storytelling and under these overarching questions some other and more specific questions have emerged: What kind of analogous forms of crises were there in Ronneby on the structural levels beside the uniquely historical actions and events? And what was the significance of these forms? What was the space of experience like, and was this space compatible or not with the horizon of expectation that was opened up by various events, actions and agencies? Or did the process contain different and perhaps more or less incompatible spaces of experiences and horizons of expectation?

From an action research perspective one has of course to ask why the action plan was interrupted. Which were the impediments? Why did the politicians totally ignore the recommendations of the second report when the realization of the recommendations of the first had been so successful? Were the recommendations too politically provocative? Or was the hush regarding the second report a consequence of "The Ronneby Scandal", and if so, of what was the public reaction an effect, i.e. what caused the reaction? Was the scandal really a turning

¹ Ibid.

point for Ronneby? And lastly, which are the lessons to be learned from an action research point of view?

Regarding the overarching research questions we have already indicated that social temporalities has to do with the circumstance that "all people" in their everyday lives not only "constantly" realise that past time is present through their various experiences but that future time in the form of expectations, and often also fears, are *simultaneously* present. That is, not only is past time influencing present time, and thus also future time, since it is in present time we plan for the future. But the reverse is also the case, i.e. future time has an effect on both present and past time in that we constantly have to look upon and perhaps reinterpret our experiences in the light of our own or other people's perceptions of the future. The implication of this is that past times, present times and future times, i.e. on many different time-layers, interact not diachronically but *synchronically*.¹

Franz Kafka has described this constantly (!) ongoing process in terms of the present as a frontline, a battle zone, between the past and the future.² It is a process that goes on in people's "social imaginaries", to use a concept that the philosopher Charles Taylor has recently invented.³ That is, we cannot physically move backwards in time, and we cannot move forwards quicker than natural time. But, and this is a vital difference, in our "inner world" we move constantly and simultaneously not only backwards and forwards in time, but also across different strata of time, i.e. both across "long" structures and "short" actions and events. The implication of this is also the answer to our two overarching research questions: That is, we are not only constantly creating "imagined communities", to use Benedict Anderson's well known concept⁴, but we are also constantly learning, all of us, it is impossible not to learn. This, of course, is entirely coherent with Dewey's concept of lifelong learning.⁵

The analogous forms of crises in Ronneby on the structural levels are thus possible to understand as synchronic processes in a battle-zone, processes when present time problems and needs, but also hopes and fears, were under simultaneous attack from two sides, both from past time experiences and future time expectations. The significance of these forms was that they by some actor-groups, led by the commissioner Mr. Roland Andersson, were perceived as fateful against the background of the appalling unemployment figures. This was the hour of destiny for Ronneby, something decisive had to be done; the space of experience was falling apart, a new horizon of expectation just *had* to be opened up. The problem with this perception was that the suggested horizon of expectation – in Mr. Andersson's words "a complete information technology community by the year of 2003" – was not mentally compatible with the space of experience of most citizens of Ronneby. On the other hand, new groups of citizens were moving in: researchers, university teachers, IT-engineers and entrepreneurs. They had a space of experience more or less in harmony with the suggested horizon or expectation; in fact it was they who described the new horizon.

Koselleck argues, as we have showed above, that this is one of the analogue traits of all revolutions; *die Erfahrungsraum* is under attack and is falling apart or at least shaken by a new *Entwartungshorizont*, which, by its advocates is not only necessary but more or less unavoidable, not to say the only hope for the future. But he also argues that this is one of the analo-

¹ Koselleck, 2002, 2004, *passim*; Lundmark, 1989, *passim*; Giddens 1984, *passim*.

² Arendt, H.; *Mellan det förflutna och framtiden*, Daidalos 2004.

³ Taylor, C.; *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press 2004.

⁴ Anderson, B.; *Den föreställda gemenskapen*. Daidalos 1992.

⁵ Dewey, J.; *Democracy and Education*. The Fress Press 1916/1966.

gous forms of a crisis understood as a singular, accelerating process in which many conflicts, bursting the system apart, accumulate so as to bring about a new situation after the crisis has passed; the concept indicates the crossing of an epochal threshold.

Now, this seems to be a pretty accurate description of the "battle-zone" in Ronneby from 1984 when the municipality board decided to go for a new industrial policy, over the more and more accelerated events at the end of the 1980s, the crescendo during the first half of the 1990s until the many conflicts burst the Project 2003 apart in November 1994. That is, we argue that it is possible to judge the whole sequence as a kind of revolution with "The Ronneby Scandal" as an epochal threshold. We shall back up this stand-point of ours along two lines of argumentation.

Firstly, and as we have argued above, time on one level can accelerate simultaneously as time on another level can be slowed down. Time can also move with different velocities for different groups of actors. That is, a process can be characterised by *conflicting velocities of time*. We argue that this was what happened in Ronneby, i.e. when the space of experience in the early 1980s started to fall apart a team of actors ("revolutionaries") inspired by the ideas of "the third industrial revolution" introduced a package of new ideas about economic development in Ronneby. This team was seconded by some national politicians and some international experts, but also by local industrialist within the ICT-sector and by researchers who argued in tune with ideas about the fast coming "information society". These "revolutionaries" had already left the old industrial space of experience and moved fast towards the new horizon of expectations *simultaneously* as the many citizens of Ronneby, and perhaps especially the blue collar workers and members of the Social Democratic Party, with great hesitance tried to get accustomed to the idea that it was necessary to let go of *their* space of experience that for long had been, *and still was*, a culture, a lifestyle, an existence, i.e. a social structure.

But this is of course not only about structures but also about events. The former have a long temporality and in that respect they are slow, the latter are short and in that respect fast. However, it is far too simplistic to refer events (and actions and agencies) to the micro-level and structure to the macro-level. Even collectives are able to act, e.g. such agents on the macro level as the municipality board, the Social Democratic Party of Ronneby, and so on. And it is as obvious that structures, which are usually referred to as large-scale social structures, can also refer to micro systems, e.g. structures that are involved in the interaction between the members of a single family. Thus, "both agency and structure can refer to either micro-level or macro-level phenomena or both".¹

In sum so far, our first line of argumentation is that more and more conflicts came up because of these conflicting velocities of time. Put in another way, the "revolutionaries" faster and faster produced events and actions and recommended more of the kind for the future, while the citizens in general defended their social structures, mentalities and habits of thought; many citizens slowly became active "counter-revolutionaries".

Secondly, along this line of conflicting velocities more and more causes for social unrest accumulated. Local shop-owners, estate agents, car-dealers and some others of course thrived on students, engineers, researchers and IT-entrepreneurs that had moved in. But blue collar workers, unemployed or not, did not. On the contrary, it was soon obvious that Ronneby in a way was on its way to become a divided, not to say a segregated, community. On the one side

¹ Ritzer 1992, p. 568.

those who more or less by definition had a future, and on the other side those who only had a past. And the latter group more and more developed hostile sentiments against the former. For instance, the aforementioned strategy to expand the idea about Soft Center to other places caused a storm of protests when the plans were made public. The protesters argued that enormous amounts of tax-payers' money had been invested in Soft Center, which was acceptable since Soft Center in spite of all seemed to be reasonable successful investment; "but to give the whole idea for *free* to other places comes close to a criminal act"¹

So, why was the action plan, Project 2003, interrupted? Which were the impediments? The questions have already been partially answered. But only partially. And yes, the recommendations of the second report were politically provocative. But not much more provocative *per se* than other recommendations, e.g. the Social Democratic Party's own suggestions to loosen the employment safety laws. No, it was the recommendations of the second report *in relation* to the particular mood among the general citizens of Ronneby that was the crucial point. Beside the strenuous economical and political situation in general in Sweden in the fall of 1994 Ronneby was almost bursting with political rumours and social gossip. In the local elections a small and new local political party with its base at the University College had deprived the Social Democrats of their majority position and hold the balance of power. For the first time since the 1920s the Social Democrats could not govern on their own but had to negotiate. And in the Town Hall there were whispers among the staff about irregularities at Soft Center. That is, what we so far have called a "counter-revolution" was not an organised movement but a growing social reaction against a sense of lost stability. Donald Schon has described this with a Biblical metaphor: "The loss of the myth of stability is frightening. It brings with it the fear of being in the Red Sea without any promised land in sight."²

We argue that this was the causes of the strong reactions to the Ronneby scandal. The political, social and economic effects were out of proportion to the wrongdoings of one of the Soft Center managers. The felony of this manager was just the igniting spark that made the since long nearly bursting powder keg explode. That is, "The Ronneby Scandal" as such was not the turning point for Ronneby and Soft Center, it was just an event that was easy to use as a metaphor for a much more complex and fateful process. The true turning point was the crossing of an epochal threshold, which in turn was caused by a long overdue crisis of conflicting velocities between different social structures – the slow transforming and "counter-revolutionary" space of experience of the citizens of Ronneby against the fast emerging and "revolutionary" horizon of expectation of researchers, business people and entrepreneurs at Soft Center.

Lastly, from an action research point of view there are some lessons to be learned. First, it is obvious that Stevrin and Uhlin underestimated the differences between their own understanding of and enthusiasm for the coming IT-society and what the general citizens of Ronneby were prepared to digest in a very short time. Second it is also apparent that they underrated the conflict of interests that politicians very often have to cope with, i.e. on the one hand their need of the voters back up, and on the other, what the situation calls for in a crisis, especially if the crisis goes on for a length of time and the necessary political decisions are provocative to the general opinion. Third, Stevrin and Uhlin also underestimated the importance of the media. Or rather, when the "shit hit the fan" the Project 2003 in practice was already over and done with. Because, at hindsight it is easy to see that it was useless to deliver the second report. It was too late. The media had already made a far-reaching "scandal" out of a rather pa-

¹ Recollection by Åke Uhlin who met fierce arguments against the plans, not to say hostile attitudes towards himself, when he as an invited speaker presented them during a Rotary Club lunch in Ronneby in September 1994.

² Schon, D. A.; *Teknik och förändring*. Pan 1969, p. 183.

thetic felony of one person. That is, "[t]he widespread opinions of the medias and the citizens are what *constitute* politics."¹

Beside these problems, which are rather easy to understand but difficult to avoid for all kinds of social researchers our case however highlights one particular problem that is especially difficult to come to grips with for action researchers. It has to do with the circumstance that time also have *other qualities than velocity*. That is, as soon as we have accepted that our existence is conceived in a time-flow that is constantly formed by the tension between an experienced past and an expected future we have exceeded the idea that time is a linear and diachronic "one damn thing after another". Then we have to accept that time consists of qualities that cannot be reduced to pure issues of dating. The statement that X is earlier than Y actually means that Y is future when X is past, and that X is past when Y is future. The importance of this is obvious when one for instance considers that the First World War did not become the first until September 1939 when the Second World War started.²

Applied to our case: As *action researchers* Stevrin and Uhlin took it for granted that their analysis and perception of the present and the future on the whole were accepted by people in general in Ronneby. But people in Ronneby endorsed other temporal qualities than the two researchers did, qualities that belonged to another space of experience, i.e. to an era before The Third Industrial Revolution. We are here referring to qualities like what Benedict Anderson has gathered in the concept of "imagined community", and what Charles Taylor have named the "social imaginaries" of a community.

The point is this: Temporal qualities are like values, i.e. they are not factual in the sense that they can be falsified or verified. They can just be more or less coherent with other temporal qualities, and thus form a more or less coherent whole. To the extent that the temporal qualities of Stevrin's and Uhlin's recommendations formed a reasonably coherent whole *it was nonetheless another qualitatively temporal whole than that of the citizens of Ronneby*. That is, Stevrin and Uhlin took the temporal qualities of their own for evident, and, furthermore, they took it for obvious that the general temporal qualities in Ronneby were coherent with their own. That was a mistake. Social scientists in general often do this temporal quality fallacy, e.g. in so called best practice and benchmarking studies, and they usually get away with it. Action researchers never do.

Epilogue

The inquiries by the police and the tax authorities continued through 1995 and 1996. The subsidiaries to the Soft Center Foundation were thoroughly scrutinized, and although the media continuously tried to reported about new "affairs" no further improprieties were detected – but the local confidence in Soft Center was severely damaged, day after day, month by month.³

In spite of all this Soft Center continued to expand during the rest of the 1990s. At the turn of the century the IT services experienced a boom. The board of Soft Center decided to expand the premises in further steps between 1995 and 2000 due to market demands. A government decision 1995 to expand higher education nationally meant that also BTH needed more space at Soft Center. That is, the expansion during the late 1990s was related to the IT boom and political decisions on the national level. The political leadership of Ronneby, on the other hand, showed a low profile and restricted its role towards the Center to that of a property

¹ McCombs, M.; *Makten över dagordningen. Om medierna, politiken och opinionsbildningen*. SNS 2006, p 60.

² Lundmark 1989. See also Loizou, A.; *The Reality of Time*, Gower 1986.

³ Interview 21 July 2007 with Mr. Tony Andersson, CEO for Soft Center Education AB between 1992-1994.

owner, i.e. it was inactive in structural development regarding matters of trade and industry and higher education and research.

In 2000 an opportunity emerged for the Town Hall to sell the whole Soft Center property. The political leadership had lost its interests in participating in further development and investment in the IT sector, and the property market was hot. Besides, connections to IT and Soft Center no longer were considered as political merits at the local level in Ronneby.

Only some months after the sellout the IT stock market collapsed. Prices on IT shares went down rapidly, and many IT businesses went bankrupt. The situation at Soft Centre turned to the worse. Many companies disappeared, and BTH got serious problems in attracting students to IT related educations. Businesses and university at Soft Center were left alone and the speed of development slowed down. Moreover, the new (private) owners of Soft Center did not care much about the original IT profile. Any business who wanted to hire premises was welcome. The new owners' principal objective obviously was to let the space, not to contribute to local development.

Even when the IT sector slowly recovered some years into the new century the crisis for BTH remained. The applications to IT related programs did not increase to their former levels. Students were not any more attracted to IT education at Soft Center in Ronneby. Thus, in December 2006 the university board took the decision to leave Campus Soft Center in Ronneby and to concentrate all education and research to Campus Gräsvik in Karlskrona.

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