

Democratic Dialogue and Development: An Intellectual Obituary of Björn Gustavsen

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Foreword

Björn Gustavsen commented on my profile of his work as a Great Organisational Change Thinker, for the Palgrave International Handbook of Great Organisational Change Thinkers (2017). He was already seriously ill with lung cancer. He was concerned with succession planning, so that his work could continue after his own death. This intellectual obituary is adapted from the profile.

Abstract

Björn Gustavsen, with an original professional background as a lawyer and judge in his native Norway, had a formative role in organisational development processes in Norway, Sweden, Scandinavia and the European Union over four decades. Following in the tradition of Norwegian working life research by Trist and Thorsrud, he provided the conceptual framework and practical case studies which have driven major national and international programmes. He learned from different experience of organisational change in, for example, the USA and Japan, but he identified a distinctive way forward for the European Union, where he acted as a senior adviser. In contrast to conventional Taylorist top-down management and reliance on expert consultants, his approach was bottom up and concept driven, with a focus on empowering workers. With a commitment to long-term sustainable processes, he emphasised the importance of capacity building and succession planning, highlighting development organisations. His approach to partnership and coalition building enabled collaboration across sectors, in the cause of creating collaborative advantage. He had a distinctive fluent academic writing style, but spent most of his time engaged in the design and practice of development, and editing the work of younger colleagues. He saw the role of academic journals and edited books in the development process, so encouraged new publications, but without seeking to dominate. He took ideas of Action Research and case studies, and applied them to national enterprise development programmes, working with the labour market parties. This resulted in a distinctive research and development culture.

Keywords: Action Research, democratic dialogue, development coalition, development organisation, labour market parties,

Introduction

Björn Gustavsen was a longstanding prominent contributor to international research literature, writing frequently at the policy level in Norway, Scandinavia, and Europe. His writing had a consistent purpose and was targeted to particular audiences. The focus of his work and writing was not academic theory, but engagement in practice in working life.

For Björn Gustavsen, thought and action were closely linked: publications are actions, and research can have a political dimension. Because this approach diverges from North American orthodoxy, he is not easily compartmentalised in conventional academic terms. Accordingly, he may be unfamiliar to many readers. Drawing on Gustavsen's writing and practical interventions, we present his consistent approach to organisational change, illustrated with accessible quotations from his publications. His core themes are democracy, dialogue, and development. We highlight in particular the themes of development organizations and development coalitions.

Influences and Motivations

Björn Gustavsen began his career as a lawyer in his home country, Norway. At the time, Norway was seeking to find a sustainable way forward after the Second World War. Gustavsen's thought maintained a consistent political direction. He saw democracy as relevant to the workplace and to the political process. This perspective stemmed from his cultural context: Norway held a preference for consensus, rather than conflict. Accordingly, there was a tradition of national agreements involving government and the labour market parties: employers and trade unions. That tradition has continued but has weakened in recent years. After decades of consensus, the extent of engagement by the labour market parties declined.

Protection and Participation

Gustavsen saw his work on drafting the Norwegian 1977 Work Environment Act as an important action research intervention (Gustavsen & Hunnius, 1981). Socio-technical ideas from the Tavistock Institute were put into practice through an intervention in the legislative process. To what extent could legislation bring about sustainable change? Could the rules within which decisions were made be changed? What would be the impact on citizens? These issues were important for a trained lawyer. In pursuing them, he helped to frame the legal dimensions of Norwegian life. He introduced the use of democratic dialogue to solve environmental and safety problems and other challenges in the workplace. This represented a transformation in approach, from worker protection to active participation for change. He saw the need to look at work environmental issues as a whole, combining technical and organisational factors. Even now, this notion still needs to be more widely understood by the labour market parties and the Norwegian tripartite system of government, employers and trade unions.

The View from Scandinavia

Organisations are culturally situated. The world can look different from Scandinavia. It is unlike North America. Indeed, "comparing Scandinavian societies to liberal capitalist ones, such as the UK and the US, may be like comparing a football and a pyramid" (Gustavsen in Ekman et al., 2011, p. 8).

The differences are certainly profound. Some of these differences have been captured in discussions of the Scandinavian Model of Business and Society, in which Gustavsen participated (e.g. Ekman et al 2011) where there is a focus on respect for work, social equity, a tripartite approach to the workplace, linking government, employers and trade unions, and consensus. This, in turn, has given rise to discussion about varieties of capitalism, in which Scandinavia has developed differently from the Liberal Capitalist economies of the USA and UK, and differently from the European Union as a whole. In this context, Gustavsen's account of development coalitions provided a language in which differences can be explored.

Although the United States and Japan have dominated management literature, Gustavsen's focus has been Norway. He has built on Norwegian experience to address international contexts, particularly in Europe. He also saw the Japanese approach to quality, with an emphasis on empowerment of workers through approaches such as Quality Circles, as providing a focus for workplace dialogue. Building on the work of the quality movement, he did not emphasise compliance and control, but instead saw it in terms of dialogue and empowerment.

Quality has been misconstrued as a means of providing quantitatively testable measures, frequently imposed externally. It is rather a matter of language, whereby those who share concerns regarding quality find that they are engaged in ongoing communication, based on common understandings. (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 82)

Gustavsen's influence extended far beyond his native Norway. He contributed to debates under many headings, crossing borders of countries, disciplines, and economic sectors. His positions and practical contributions were consistent and distinctive.

Understanding Gustavsen

Gustavsen drove theory from practice (Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996). He rejected a reliance on "expert-led change," which gives power to consultants and tends to be imposed top-down. Rather, he favoured "concept-driven" processes of change (Gustavsen et al., 1996): bottom-up, based on democratic principles. This theoretical objective was made practical through live cases with an emphasis on active participation. He did not offer single, dogmatic solutions or one best way. His work was intended to help people learn from differences, because differences represent a vital resource. He argued that we are best able to learn from the experiences of others when we ourselves are engaged in processes of change.

Gustavsen's Norwegian background is vital for understanding his work. Born in April 1938, he received a law degree from the University of Oslo in 1964. He was an assistant judge in the years 1965 to 1966. He joined the Norwegian Work Research Institute (AFI) in 1970, becoming its director from 1972 to 1983. He was then Professor at the Swedish National Institute for Working Life (NIWL) from 1986 to 1999. His focus throughout was on working life. He was not an ivory tower academic or a commercial consultant. Even prior to Gustavsen's affiliation with them, both AFI and NIWL (until its closure in 2007) hosted strong traditions of Scandinavian research on working life. AFI is now largely funded from contract work with industry sponsors. NIWL researchers were dispersed to universities and research institutes across Sweden.

Subsequent generations of researchers have not always understood Gustavsen's work and methods, especially researchers relying solely on academic literature. For example, they have sometimes suggested that Gustavsen disregarded issues of power. To the contrary, his tacit knowledge of such issues informed his actions, rather than being spelled out in text. He brokered deals with those in power; namely, the Norwegian government, employers, and trade unions.

Gustavsen must be understood in context. He was the architect of a series of major, government-supported development programmes in Scandinavia, whereas other international scholars have preferred to work only in academia or as consultants in the private sector. Unlike a generation of innovative pioneers who made generalisations based on reducing their differences, Gustavsen instead saw differences as a valuable resource for collaborative learning.

In contrast with many American management gurus, Gustavsen did not offer ready-made solutions based on celebrated cases. He opposed Taylorism, top down management practice, and, like Japanese quality experts, preferred to focus on empowering the workforce. This meant emphasising participation, engagement, and in particular, dialogue. Gustavsen stated, "Dialogue refers to conversations, or discussions, between equal partners,

characterised by openness, willingness to listen to each other, to accept good arguments and generally to learn from each other” (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 81).

Gustavsen did not, however, offer neat and definite conclusions after the process of dialogue. If a process of dialogue is to be sustainable, he would argue, it cannot be brought to an end with final agreements. There must be room for additional participants, if development is to continue. This principle is fundamental for organisations. Thus, it may be a mistake to seek single answers. Democratic dialogue was a priority for Gustavsen, throughout his work.

Like the philosopher Wittgenstein, whose work he uses (Wittgenstein, 1954; Ennals, 2016), Gustavsen tended to set his own agenda rather than be driven by the academic literature. He did not start by thinking in terms of individual firms in a capitalist economic system. He chose different units of analysis, at the meso level, between individual firms and regions. Language and dialogue were important as participants are engaged. His perspective was bottom-up and strategic.

Rather than relying simply on developments in the United States, he tried to learn from changes in locations such as Japan and the European Union, and to apply them in particular to Scandinavia. His focus is on development, rather than management. He had deep personal roots in Norway, but he was able to maintain professional careers in both Sweden and Norway. This provided opportunities for comparisons and benchmarking.

Action Research and Organisational Change

Gustavsen’s practical engagement provided the basis for his theoretical contributions. He was a major figure in the action research academic literature (Gustavsen, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007; Gustavsen et al., 2008), but he pursued his own pragmatic line of argument while based at AFI. Although action research has often centered on individuals, Gustavsen was primarily concerned with organisational change. He developed contexts for regional development and national enterprise development, and incorporated action research into major programmes. Action researchers became instruments of policy, and actors in the processes of organisational change (Gustavsen et al., 2001; Levin, 2002).

Gustavsen long worked closely with Norway’s labour market partners: trade unions and employers. Behind the scenes he maintained engagement in the collaborative culture and designed a succession of major programmes. He was also active in European projects, seeking to develop ongoing European networks. He held senior professorial posts at the University of Oslo (1985–1999), the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim (from 2000), and the University of Vestfold.

From that set of academic bases, Gustavsen led work on enterprise development and regional development. For Gustavsen, evaluation is a key part of any development programme, which is a process that requires engagement. He states, “Evaluations emerge as active, constructive processes in which those who perform the evaluation put a lot of their own ideas into the process” (Gustavsen in Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996, p. 26). He designed, led, and evaluated a series of programmes in Sweden, including Leadership Co-ordination and Co-operation (LOM) and The Working Life Fund (ALF) (Gustavsen et al., 2006), and Norway, including Enterprise Development 2000 (Gustavsen et al., 2001) and Value Creation 2010 (Johnsen & Ennals, 2012). Each involved government, employers and trade unions,

Development

Organisational development requires effective collaboration. Gustavsen argued that individuals can achieve relatively little by working alone. We find partners with whom we can engage productively and develop a sustained relationship. We build a network of contacts on which to draw in particular circumstances. We create collaborative

advantage. When a new challenge arises, we build a coalition of the willing from our partners and network contacts with different backgrounds, and we seek to bring about change. We refer to this as a development coalition. It may cross previous borders, facilitating change and offering a context in which action research can bring results.

Development can take place in many contexts. It involves a move from the known to the unknown. People work together, creating social capital, when they trust their co-workers and feel a common sense of direction or shared value. They engage in “pre-competitive collaboration”, creating collaborative advantage (Johnsen & Ennals, 2012).

Development Coalitions

Gustavsen’s concept of development coalitions (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999; Ennals, 2014) was applied at local, regional, national, and European levels. It provided a unifying theme for his work on organisational change.

A development coalition is a structure in which different partners come together to pursue a shared objective or create collaborative advantage. Regional and national development programmes, particularly in Norway, have at times recommended the creation of development coalitions, bringing together large and small enterprises, public sector organisations, and universities or research organisations. Sometimes a new legal entity has been created, with implications both for business and for democratic accountability.

Action research is encountered at the level of individual actors, such as reflective professionals, in accordance with the Action Research Journal tradition, and through the International Journal of Action Research tradition of organisational change and renewal. These traditions are different, with diverse philosophical reference points, and few common references, but Gustavsen wanted to demonstrate that they can be complementary. The integrative but often temporary role of a development coalition can be a link, because it facilitates collaboration. It can even be seen as a form of action research in itself, creating a structure that enables new possibilities.

Development coalitions are not a distinct and separate category of organisation; they do not provide consistent contexts for individual action research or for analysis by economic geographers. In some cases, where Gustavsen was influential in programme design and management, researchers were employed to follow the policy of the programme, but in other cases action research was used to develop and implement strategy.

There have been historic cases of collaborative activity that we might now consider as action research, for example the creation of NGOs (non-governmental organisations formed as development coalitions) to abolish the transatlantic slave trade. We can build on past experience, and provide foundations for others to use. This tradition has continued in Latin America in emancipatory action research. So, the similarities between work in action research in Brazil and Norway can now be recognised.

Dialogue and Development

Discussion of development coalitions arises from a context of dialogue, particularly in Scandinavia, where dialogue seminars and dialogue conferences play prominent roles. Within dialogue, individuals can reflect on their own professional experience. They do not necessarily reach agreement, but they are able to move on in their understanding, often working with new groups of people.

Gustavsen articulated principles of “democratic dialogue” which are widely shared, especially in Scandinavia:

1. The dialogue is a process of exchange: ideas and arguments move to and fro between the participants.
2. It must be possible for all concerned to participate.

3. This possibility for participation is, however, not enough. Everybody should also be active. Consequently each participant has an obligation not only to put forward his or her own ideas, but also to help others to contribute their ideas.
4. All participants are equal.
5. Work experience is the basis for participation. This is the only type of experience which, by definition, all participants have.
6. At least some of the experience which each participant has when entering the dialogue must be considered legitimate.
7. It must be possible for everybody to develop an understanding of the issues at stake.
8. All arguments which pertain to the issues under discussion are legitimate. No argument should be rejected on the ground that it emerges from an illegitimate source.
9. The points, arguments etc. which are to enter the dialogue must be made by a participating actor. Nobody can participate “on paper” alone.
10. Each participant must accept that other participants can have better arguments.
11. The work role, authority etc. of all the participants can be made subject to discussion: no participant is exempt in this respect.
12. The participants should be able to tolerate an increasing degree of difference of opinion.
13. The dialogue must continually produce agreements which can provide platforms for practical action. (Gustavsen, 1992, pp. 3–4)

When we consider enterprise and regional levels, work organisation can be regarded as a missing link both within and between organisations. In concept-driven development, the lead comes from workforce participation. A pivotal role is played by the development organisation, which is a temporary and transitional structure, allowing participants to explore new ways of thinking and working. The participants may alternate between work organisation and development organisation, taking ideas and experience with them. The European Union can be regarded as an arena in which development organisations are facilitated, both at the national level and through networks supported by framework programmes.

Regional Development Coalitions

In Norway, with its enthusiasm for regional policies, there is a continuing focus on regional development coalitions, which have been a central component of nationally funded programmes of enterprise development (Gustavsen et al., 1997; Gustavsen et al., 2001; Levin, 2002). Regional development coalitions provide a means of advancing shared aspirations. They have sometimes been misunderstood as precise descriptions of particular organisational forms, rather than as the outcomes of collective efforts. After an informal start, Norwegian regional development coalitions have sometimes become government-funded policy instruments. Researchers were not autonomous, but rather were employees in such programmes. As a result, there was debate on the democratic credentials of a structure that represented a set of interest groups, and could not claim to be detached.

Even in Norway, no two regions are the same in their economic activities, leading institutions, or distinctive cultural histories. New patterns of collaboration were required. Discussion of the issue occurred at a level of analysis above the single enterprise and below the national government. Geographical regions are located at this intermediate (meso) level.

In Europe, regions vary in size, having in common only the fact that they are regions. They host distinctive patterns of innovation. Gustavsen's networking projects compared experience in many countries: Sweden, Norway, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, and the United Kingdom (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999). Gustavsen suggested the concept of regions of meaning (Gustavsen, 2004), thus escaping the constraints of geography.

Gustavsen led international collaborative research that brought education and training together in coalitions with regional development. His approach was to use European regional learning cases from participating countries such as Germany, Norway, Portugal, Greece, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Lithuania (Gustavsen et al., 2007). He anticipated that lessons could then be learned from the differences among them. Over a series of workshops, researchers described cases in which they were personally involved against the background of other cases. This procedure linked discourses on vocational education and training with regional development.

The Dialogue Conference

Gustavsen's influence can be seen in the continued impact of the Norwegian Model, which includes an emphasis on democracy, social partnership, social equity, and consensus. He designed and managed national programmes of enterprise development, made possible by Norway's government income from oil and gas. He developed a research methodology for projects with working life, making extensive use of dialogue conferences (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). This method of using dialogue conferences has been widely adopted by his followers.

Throughout the 1980s, by far the most important measure within the framework of the Norwegian agreement was a kind of conference, initially called a Mapping Conference, later a Dialogue Conference. With participation from all levels of the formal organisation, the purpose of the conference was to create local discussions around issues like work organisation, in the light of the challenges facing each enterprise. The point was the conversation as such. (Gustavsen in Johnsen & Ennals, 2012, p. 30)

Influence

Gustavsen was influenced by the work of the Tavistock Institute in Great Britain on socio-technical systems and organisational change, where he worked. In turn, his work has influenced Great Britain's Work Organisation Network and network partners across the European Union. He has shown himself capable of understanding issues in Great Britain thanks to the common ancestry of the research. Gustavsen has operated in many contexts and often at several levels at once, some of them behind the scenes. At times he was like Alfred Hitchcock, a writer and director who also plays a modest role on stage.

Gustavsen did not generally base himself in academia, but rather at AFI, with active engagement in projects and advisory roles within government. He did not favor grandstanding and Powerpoint presentations, but preferred active, engaged dialogue. His contributions appeared spontaneous, rather than prepackaged, as he used the language of his interlocutors. He joined debates and followed the rules of their language games. He operated inside the debate, rather than as a detached observer, and he sought to encourage concept-driven development, rather than expert-led development. This meant using the language of the dialogue as a starting point.

A concept driven process is not only a process which is organised around a specific idea: it also implies that the idea has been developed through broad dialogues within the organisation, where

the concept emerges as an expression of contributions from a broad range of organisational members. (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, 41)

Gustavsen was interested in ideas of a “third way”, between capitalism and socialism, but in practice rather than just rhetoric. This approach enabled him to explore development coalitions in both public and private sectors. Even when his projects took place in private-sector, capitalist contexts, Gustavsen’s focus continued to be on partnership, dialogue, collaboration, and collaborative advantage. He looked at work organisation, both within and between organisations.

Diffusion

It is all very well to develop individual successful cases. Yet how can case studies be applied to specific situations to bring about change? The answer is not obvious. Gustavsen asked whether “it [is] reasonable to believe that experimental changes, star cases, or other examples of ‘outstanding systems’ could really be diffused or disseminated to other workplaces” (Gustavsen in Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996, p. 18). The way change occurs, according to Gustavsen, is by being diffused through interactions between organizations. As formulated by Gustavsen (Gustavsen in Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996, p. 20):

- Changes are broadly defined efforts which seek to cover all major issues, organisational levels and interest groups within the enterprise
- Many enterprises are involved.
- In a pattern which encourages co-operation between the participants
- Based on a pattern of mutual contributions rather than leader-follower.
- Researchers and other professional resources play a role which is complementary rather than leading.
- The efforts are not steered by one single theory of good organisation.
- Theories or views on optimum organisational structures are kept open in the early phases of the process.
- General theory, general views, general assumptions pertain to the process of how to create local understanding and change.
- Continuous interaction between the enterprises themselves is the primary channel of diffusion.

Gustavsen can be seen as Norwegian, Scandinavian, and European. His influence can be seen in each arena. He talks and writes from the experience of practice and suggests an approach to learning from different cases.

Toulmin in “Cosmopolis” (Toulmin 1990) argues that a discursive comparison of experiences has to be the foundation for whatever can be extracted from each case for use in other cases. In a process of discursive comparison the point is not primarily to decide “who is best” or what “universal truths” can be derived from all the cases taken together, but to use cases in alternating figure-ground relationships which enable each participant to gain a better understanding of his or her practices when seen in the light of what others do, what options they see, and so on. The goal is not to lay

down universally applicable laws, but to move ahead through a discourse on experience that can enrich all participants. (Gustavsen in Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996, p. 13)

At the same time, he used theory to frame practice; for example, when developing international seminars of researchers and practitioners with the objective of creating connectedness rather than pursuing predetermined agendas. As he stated: “Innovation is connectedness. Only by being connected is it possible to know what others do and to use this as the raw materials for one’s own innovative acts” (Gustavsen in Gustavsen, Finne, & Oscarsson, 2001, p. 245).

Gustavsen presented connectedness in terms of development coalitions, a central concept in his account of organisational change. In one representative passage, he states: “To form learning organisations or development coalitions, we need to learn together. This is not so much a question of methods as it is of good will” (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 16).

Key Contributions

Gustavsen introduced a consistent language for discussing organisational change and development. This enabled others to follow him. Of course at times his followers were not familiar with the background. The key focus was on work organisation, within and between organisations, building the picture from the bottom up through productive partnerships, alliances, and development coalitions.

As an expression of the idea of learning organisations, development coalitions are fluid, transitional, continuously reshaping themselves to meet new challenges. Essentially, they are made up of horizontal relationships, constituting channels through which information flows, experiences are compared and new solutions are worked out, through extracting the best out of a broad range of experience and ideas. (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 57)

Gustavsen did not see work organisation as a separate and distinct area of study. Instead he argued that work organisation is a reflexive characteristic of organisations undergoing change. We must recognise that we are involved in such organisations.

It seems that where much research and thinking on work organisation has gone wrong has been in assuming that a phenomenon that is linked to a whole series of other issues and topics, where each and every one exhibits a substantial dynamic, can be made subject to an autonomous formation of theory. Rather, work organisation seems to demand a reflexive thinking. (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 53)

Younger generations of researchers have adopted methods like his dialogue conferences, as a result of his focus on building critical mass.

Gustavsen also contributed to theory and practice in action research, thus keeping abreast of debates in the field. For some academics his work was outside the mainstream because he emphasised managed research. He considered regions, nations, and continents, rather than individuals. This raised questions about a limited focus on individuals such as chief executives. For Gustavsen, action research and politics are hard to separate.

We see the role of the researcher as a partner in development coalitions. In a development coalition, the point is not for all participants to become alike but to pool resources, supplement each other, help each other, provide complementary resources.

Within such a context, research has a number of contributions to make, based on its specific competences in conceptual development, in interpreting events, in developing methodologies, and even, provided that the necessary care and caution is shown, to create theory. (Gustavsen, 1997, p. 199)

Researchers cannot simply claim objective detachment: they are engaged, part of the subject under study.

Gustavsen created the basis for a family of major programmes for organisational change on national and international levels: Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, and the European Union. On the basis of the Swedish LOM and ALF programs, he advanced the development of critical frameworks and a benchmarking methodology. He emphasised that we can learn from our experience of change by describing it against a background of other cases. He introduced assumptions about dialogue and collaboration, rather than simply competition.

As a professor at NIWL, Gustavsen advised Allan Larsson, then Director-General of DG Employment and Social Affairs in the European Commission, on the 1997 Green Paper, “Partnership for a New Organisation of Work,” which expressed many of Gustavsen’s ideas. This initiative was less successful than at first appeared, when it provided a focus for international networks. Larsson had been a Swedish minister, and the Green Paper recommended that the EU should follow a Swedish lead, shortly after Sweden had joined the EU. Others in DG Employment and Social Affairs, for example from France, took a different view. Gustavsen had a vision of development coalitions, a European network, and a network of networks, with Europe constituting a development coalition. He stated: “It is when we approach the idea of comparisons in settings made up of a large number of actors and enterprises that the idea of ‘Europe’ as a development coalition starts to gain credibility (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 9).

Gustavsen led two collaborative projects that focused on Europe as a development coalition: Both followed his approach of dialogue and learning from differences. From his standpoint, “the European Union is itself a development coalition structure which has the objective of supporting development, both at a continental level, and in the terms required by the individual member states, themselves increasingly operating as development coalitions” (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 75). However, other policy perspectives prevailed. As a result, Larsson resigned from the European Commission.

Gustavsen chose different units of analysis, rather than the single firm. In particular he wrote about the meso level, existing between the levels of the firm and the region, which could be highlighted by dialogue conferences. He developed an account of work organisation dealing with relations between organisations. He introduced productive partnerships, development organisations, development coalitions, and regional development coalitions. He envisioned “a movement towards network co-operation between enterprises, even a movement towards whole regions becoming ‘units of change’” (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 29).

Gustavsen built academic relationships with American organisational-change theorists, while working in a Scandinavian context. His American audiences did not always understand the context in which he worked; for example, the roles of labour market parties. He enabled the formation of new journals (CAT, IJAR) without seeking to dominate them.

He did not seek a high personal profile or sold consultancy services, preferring to orchestrate and to facilitate participation. He could be seen as a modern Machiavelli, working behind the scenes, while being sensitive to the needs of the major actors. He tailored his advice to the needs of actors, enabling them to take ownership. He empowered others to develop and to present challenges. His personal interventions were practical, making the complex seem simple. He drew on experience and tacit knowledge, which of course could not be fully documented. His actions expressed what needed to be said.

New Insights

I first met Björn Gustavsen in 1988, after my own experience of managing national research programmes in Advanced IT in Great Britain and the European Union. His ideas resonated, and they contrasted with conventional research management. He referred to a different philosophical framework from the techno-centric positivism which then dominated Great Britain. For Gustavsen, collaborative research, even when the apparent focus was on new technology, was primarily about work organisation as a reflexive dimension of the organisation, the use of language, and the need for developing dialogue.

Gustavsen gave practical reality to philosophical theory in a way I had not previously encountered in Great Britain. He made confident use of philosophers and developed new ways of working. He and Bo Göranson (Göranson, 1988–1995; 2006) at NIWL were both influenced by Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1954; Ennals, 2016) and worked with Stephen Toulmin (Toulmin, 1990, 2001), John Shotter (Shotter, 2006), and Oyvind Pålshaugen (Pålshaugen, 2006).

Gustavsen developed what has been called the communicative turn, developing dialogue in organisations and taking up ideas from Jurgen Habermas (Habermas, 1984). Live action research case studies provided a starting point for comparisons and further cases. He used discussion of case studies as “an apparatus for linking research to actors in working life, in such a way that research can contribute to practical development” (Gustavsen, 2007, p. 97).

Having taken a distinctive approach to action research, Gustavsen set it in a wider context:

The difference between action research and other forms of research is not that somewhere along the line of arguments values emerge, but that action research explicitly faces the challenges associated with a commitment to values, rather than keep on under the pretence that the challenges do not exist. (Gustavsen, 2007, p. 103)

The philosopher Wittgenstein spent much time in Norway. In consultation with Toulmin and Shotter, Gustavsen developed Wittgenstein’s work on family resemblances, language games, and forms of life. Typically practice went ahead of theoretical argument.

It is this element of “family resemblance” between organisations that, in combination with the ability to conduct dialogues across as many boundaries as possible, constitutes the collaborative advantage of the Scandinavian societies. Numerous different alliances are possible, and the potential for innovation systems correspondingly large. (Gustavsen in Johnsen & Ennals, 2012, p. 37)

Gustavsen always took an interest in power. He advised governments and the European Commission. Perhaps more radically, he saw research and power as closely associated. In his national programmes, political and research agendas were often fused into a version of action research. This was not necessarily recognised as part of mainstream action research.

Legacies and Unfinished Business

If we apply Gustavsen’s lessons to our own work, several broad points emerge. There is no one best way. We need to secure the active participation of everyone in an organisation if it is to develop; it is a matter of democracy in the workplace and in society. We need to be able to learn from differences. We must expect our successors to see things differently. Organisations will continue to change.

Gustavsen linked work organization and policy debate, research and politics. Gustavsen’s work continues, with an associated literature. He always gave priority to publication and dissemination. He worked on the borders between policy and research, with a focus on practical development.

All concepts applied in social research have two sources of meaning: other words and practical experience. Making knowledge more actionable implies increasing the emphasis on the practical. The shift demands a process consisting of several steps, ranging from establishing dialogic relationships with other people to the development of “regions of meaning”, where theory and practice can interact in new ways. (Gustavsen, 2004, p. 147)

Could the next generation match his breadth and depth? Alternatively, would they bring fresh ideas and inspiration? He helped establish the doctoral program in Enterprise Development and Working Life (EDWOR), based at NTNU in Trondheim, which brought together researchers from projects around Norway to build a national research culture based on action research. The successful graduates are now leading research institutes.

Gustavsen set out the core ideas for a strong European tradition in work organisation. He helped to develop a common language and conceptual approach for participants coming from diverse backgrounds across Europe. He influenced those who work in the AFI tradition, such as Oyvind Pålshaugen, Olav Eikeland, Morten Levin, and Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen. He continued to maintain links with Swedish colleagues such as Goran Brulin after the closure of NIWL.

Because of his work, the EU Green Paper, “Partnership for a New Organisation of Work” (1997), was Swedish or Scandinavian in tone and assumptions. There has been a continual, active network at national and international levels, such as Peter Totterdill at the U.K. Work Organisation Network (UKWON) and Steven Dhondt, Frank Pot, and Peter Totterdill of the European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN).

Perhaps Gustavsen’s most lasting legacy is in Norway, where he spent the last years of his career. Gustavsen’s ideas, some tested in Sweden, underpinned a remarkable series of Norwegian national programmes: Enterprise Development 2000, Value Creation 2010, and the VRI programme of regional initiatives. It is unusual to have consistent national programmes over so many years. Diversity in local and regional programmes continued: there is no single common pattern.

Recent academic researchers have discussed issues of power. Gustavsen entered into partnerships with power because he saw dialogue with the labour market parties as underpinning projects on enterprise development. Gustavsen developed the theory and practice of regional development coalitions, which were seen as ways of building collaboration and taking forward change processes. In an era when there was obsession with creating competitive advantage, he laid the foundations for work on creating collaborative advantage.

There has been considerable debate about how lessons can be derived from cases. Gustavsen opposed a mechanistic approach to project evaluation. By designing and implementing large-scale programmes, he brought cases into contact with each other. He pioneered Nordic benchmarking and what he called the figure-ground approach of describing one case against the background of another. Going one step farther, and drawing on action research, he showed what can be learned from a single case.

When something new enters a map of knowledge, it will not be much noted if the new element is exactly like one or more of those that were already there. It is only when it stands out that it is able to attract attention and trigger new thinking. The notion of learning from differences opens up, for example, forms of collaboration that cut across technologies, branches and the distinction between the public and the private.

(Gustavsen in Johnsen & Ennals, 2012, p. 34)

Succession Planning

Björn Gustavsen continued to be active until the end of his life. He was not simply a detached academic observer. We can identify his concern for the future through his active succession planning, in which he tried to ensure that there are strong candidates for key posts, taking the work forward. This applies to Norway and Sweden. Gustavsen continued to influence other research leaders in fields such as Action Research (Greenwood & Levin, 1997; Levin, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008), and economic geography (Asheim in Gustavsen et al., 2007; and Cooke in Gustavsen et al., 2007)). He was eager to develop mechanisms for dissemination and diffusion, such as the EDWOR doctoral program, and new academic journals (Concepts and Transformation, International Journal of Action Research, and the European Journal of Workplace Innovation).

Gustavsen developed an agenda of continuing programme themes, which can drive new projects. As he emphasised, it is the conversation and the process of dialogue that are most important. We cannot expect to agree on final conclusions. We hope to continue to learn. Gustavsen tackled some big issues, which we continue to explore: regional development, productivity, innovation. He challenged over easy assumptions and emphasised the importance of the workplace in innovation. He laid the foundations for ongoing development. He focused on empowering practitioners, trade unionists, and employers, and on working with labour market parties. He saw beyond individual firms, with experience of programme learning from national programmes (Sweden, Norway, Germany, Finland). He worked with economic geographers, but he went beyond their vision, as he defined regions in terms of dialogue as “regions of meaning”. He made a fundamental contribution to the new debate on workplace innovation (Gustavsen 2015).

A New Project

As this profile was being prepared for the Palgrave International Handbook of Great Organisational Change Thinkers, Björn Gustavsen marked his 78th birthday. He was also launching a new project (Hansen, 2016). As Norway was struggling to deal with the collapse in the prices of oil and gas, it had also accepted unprecedented numbers of refugees. It was a matter of concern to Gustavsen that this came when the framework of collaboration between the labour market parties and the wider tripartite dialogue needed to be strengthened. There needed to be new ways of organising co-operation, based on Gustavsen’s ideas of development coalitions and creating connectedness. He explored open co-operation, where nobody owns the process, but everyone contributes on his or her own premises to create future patterns of co-operation rather than defining the final result in a tribal language. As so often before, Gustavsen was personally engaged. With his death on 5th September 2018, the work is unfinished. There is work to be done by his successors.

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Further Reading

As seen above, Gustavsen contributed to the development of a rich supporting literature. This final section includes a short list of reference books that enables readers to further their interests.

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