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The Basis for Scandinavian IS Research

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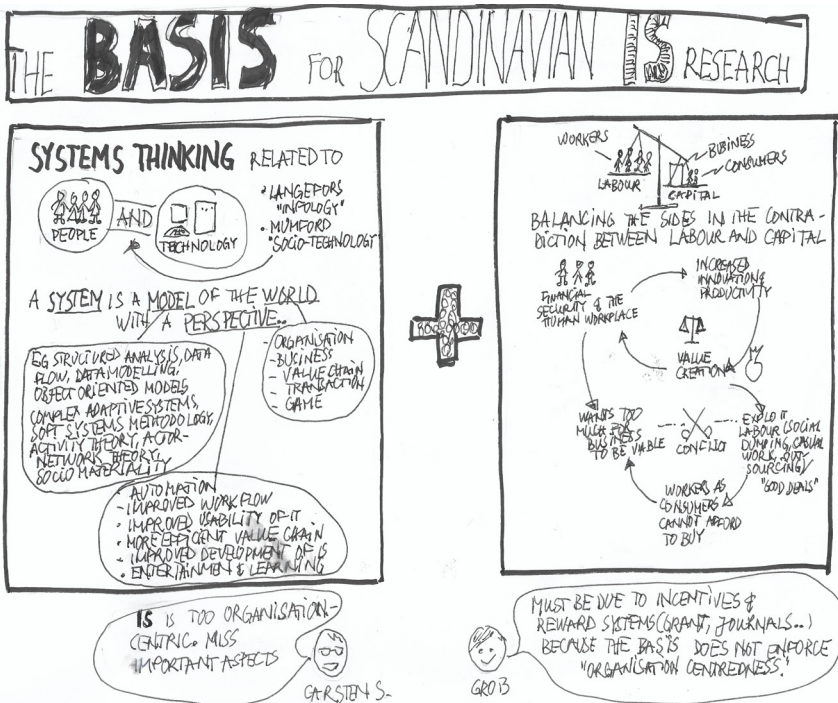
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Figure 1. The basis for Scandinavian IS research

I have chosen to present my comment to Carsten Sørensen's article as a drawing, in the strong tradition of visual communication within the IS discipline. Here I will add a few comments.

I agree with Carsten that over the last 30 years IS research has been centred on (business) organisasations. My interpretation of the article is that Carsten assumes that this focus is the basis for the IS discipline, and that we need to broaden the basis to cater for current trends. This is where I disagree with Carsten. In my understanding, the IS discipline is founded on two pillars, 1) systems thinking, and 2) exploring the contradiction between labour and capital. The notion of contradiction refers to the mutual dependency of labour and capital as well as the conflicting interests between the two. IS as a discipline is focussed on the role of technology in this contradiction, and systems thinking gives us the framework for exploration.

Systems thinking has been applied in our discipline in a number of ways, as a perspectiv; e.g.; soft systems thinking, actor-network theory, activity theory, socio-materiality; as a method of exploration (using different systems as a vehicle to capture the essence of what we are exploring), and as a utensil for communication as; e.g.; rich pictures, data flow diagrams, object-oriented analysis and design, different business process modelling tools.

The contradiction between labour and capital was actually the background for the first projects within the so-called critical Scandinavian tradition in the the 1970ies, which focussed on trade unions, not on single business organisations.

I understand Carsten's pledge for a broader perspective as an encouragement to explore the contradiction of labour and capital in a broader sense. E.g.; as employees we are on the labour side of the contradiction, but as consumers, we are on the capital side. How does our behaviour as consumers influence workers, when we want to buy the cheapest clothes (outsourcing, on-line shops, casualisation of work), and want the cheapest taxi and over-night stay (uber and airbnb)? And what role does technology play in these societal changes?

30 years ago, information was collected to control business processes. Today, information is a currency in itself, as we can see in the current focus on big data, and on the strategic distribution of information like Wikileaks and the Panama Papers. Thus the ownership and use of information is a whole new area to investigate.

These phenomena can without problems be explored within the existing IS discipline.

In my view, the reason why research in the IS discipline is still organisation centred, must be found elsewhere, for example in the research reward systems. What is the probability to get an academic position, to get research grants, and to publish papers on conferences and in journals when focussing on the broader issues?

Notes

1. Gro Bjerknes has worked within IS for 35 years. She has performed numerous projects and both conceptually and empirically investigated and provided advice on IS related phenomena as a scholar and as a practitioner in roles as consultant, business analyst, and project manager in Norway, Denmark and Australia.