

# **Spirit and Politics, Love and the System:**

## **Looking for bridges between one and the same**

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The research question for this book developed during my political work with NGOs and academic institutions. Or perhaps it developed during my evenings in spiritual and therapeutic groups. Or perhaps right in between these two.

I began to notice that the values and worldviews which were relevant in mediation groups on Wednesday evenings did not seem to apply in office work on Thursday morning. Non-duality and loving kindness did not seem to feature as categories in most political work I have had a chance to witness; not as a practice, but also not as an ideal, not even as a matter of debate over possible ideals, mostly. Inner change did not come up as a relevant category either, and keeping oneself as a person as separate as possible from one's work was often assumed to be desirable, especially in an academic or semi-academic environment.

At the same time, spiritual and therapeutic groups seemed to focus almost exclusively on inner change and on the individual; little attention was given to the existence of outer structures, the impact they have on us, and most importantly perhaps, our ability to change such structures.

It seemed like two different spheres, two different windows onto the world, with little overlap between them.

Yet I was looking out of both of them, and I was not the only one. Many of the people I met in spiritual, creative or self-development contexts were also engaged in political work of one kind or the other, or were at least politically interested. Likewise, many of my office colleagues were taking Yoga classes in the evenings, or were practising Christians, and enrolled in a therapeutic group where softness, love, attentiveness and awareness of inner processes played a major role.

There was considerable overlap between these two communities in terms of the people present; though not terms of the discourse practised.

I began to long for a place where the two could come together. Wouldn't it be possible to see what political work looks like when based on loving kindness?

No, not possible – that was the first reaction I got when proposing the question to my friends in the political and academic environment. The world is in fact full of oppression, they said, and therefore critique and resistance are required. After which they would give me examples of oppression and suffering, and the conversation usually ended there.

Nevertheless the question did stay with me, and also the belief, or the hope, that it might be possible. Wouldn't it at least be worth inquiring in that direction? I began to research into literature, websites, groups and organisations, looking for aspects that might be related to what I was looking for, or for people who might not have any answers, but at least an interest in the approach.

So the first step in my research was to establish the legitimacy, and the possibility, of the question. Fortunately, that went very well. I have not only literature pointing to one aspect or the other, but also groups and individual people looking for such forms of political work, perhaps even trying out a few practices leading in that direction.

I feel a bit the way Paul Ray describes, talking about what he refers to as Cultural Creatives<sup>1</sup>: there are millions of people with similar value orientations and life practices; and each one feeling like the only one, lost in a mainstream that follows a decidedly different logic.

I do not know if we are a growing sub-culture, perhaps the coming mainstream. Perhaps all the groups I have found did not exist five years ago, or perhaps I have just not known about them. Perhaps my feeling of a growing sub-culture simply results from the fact that I, personally, choose to surround myself more and more with like-minded people. That I certainly do; doesn't mean it isn't a growing sub-culture.

I will not try here to decide or to prophesy whether or not this is the cutting edge of a new societal trend, the dawn of a new cultural era. Be that as it may, it is what appeals to me, what I would like to understand better, and to do more of. Which is all I need to know, really, to decide to pursue the subject further. How large the number of like-minded people interested in similar issues really is, only time will tell.

## ***Values, aims and means in political work***

I would like to expand a little more on what it was that has appealed to me so that I wanted to start looking for new forms of being political.

Something has prompted me to start looking for new approaches; things that I have encountered, experienced, that I felt profoundly attracted by, that I knew I wanted to be part of my personal life here and now, as well as of a future society. I am not sure whether these things are best called values, or aspects, or approaches, or ideals, or attitudes, or states of being. Perhaps all of these terms are appropriate at some points.

The commonality between them all is that they represent something dear, desirable and valuable to me, something that I want to experience, to receive, to embody and to give while I am alive on this earth; and also something that I feel should be a feature of the society I would like to help emerge. Also, that I found them lacking or at least grossly marginalised in the type of political work I have been in contact with so far.

I will try to give a few examples here, glimpses that may allow to get a feel for what it is that has prompted me.

### **Love**

Love is perhaps a good example. Love was not an issue in the political groups I have been involved in. If it was referred to at all, then only in the form of a critique, for instance in feminist groups pointing out how the concept of "love" is being instrumentalised to stabilise particular forms of relationships and the gender roles embedded in them.

However, a positive reference to love did not seem to cross my path in my political work. By and large, love was a non-issue. People and organisations did not oppose it, nor were we in favour, nor did we discuss what it could mean and what could further or hinder its emergence. Perhaps we generally treated it as something belonging to the private sphere of couples, and the private sphere as separate from our political work (thereby validating a good part of the feminist criticism mentioned above).

Could love mean anything on a political level? Could it be a guiding principle, an aim, and perhaps a means of our political work?

In the introduction to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire says

"From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, my faith in men and women, and my faith in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love."<sup>ii</sup>

That, to me, seems one very good way of introducing love into our thinking about political aims. That we need not create love as such, but just a world where it will be easier, more likely. Contributing to a world where it is easier to love may include, for instance, distributing material resources in a way that means no one is starving. At the same time, discussion about material resources in this setting is oriented towards love, towards a goal that lies on another level than the material resources as such. It is clear that the distribution of material resources, or production, or economic activity in general are means to an end, not the ultimate end in themselves.

"Work is love in action" is a motto I have come to know at the Findhorn Community, a spiritual community, education centre and ecovillage in Northern Scotland; this seems another possible angle to take. Metta, or loving kindness, is a very important principle in Buddhism, that I can also relate to well. What role did it play in my office, and in the work I did there? What role could it play?

There are probably many ways of bringing love into our political work; as a concept, as an issue, as a political goal, as a state of being while I am working. What I would like to do is to explore these. What could it mean to me? What is it that I would like to experience during my brief time on this earth? What future would I like to contribute to? And what concrete forms can that take in my political work, in my everyday action?

### **Permissiveness - acceptance - celebration - gentleness - affirmation**

So perhaps love is the attitude, or the state of being, I wish to incorporate into my political work. Perhaps it could also be a form of general benevolence. A general sense of welcome and appreciation with which I would like to approach the world.

It may also be a form of gentleness. An attitude that allows different things to be, and different people to be. It may be tolerance, it may be acceptance. It may be an affirmation. It may be an expression of the heartfelt wish: "I want you to be". It may be loving kindness. "May all beings be happy, and free from suffering and the sources of suffering" is perhaps a Buddhist way of phrasing a similar sentiment.

Permissiveness may come in here, too. A form of liberalism and openness. A permission to be; for me, and for all things. "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here."<sup>iii</sup>

Gentleness, patience and appreciation towards myself may be linked to the gentleness, patience and appreciation I can have for others and for the world. Inner and outer spheres, attitudes and actions may mirror one another here.

Is this an attitude I have found embodied in the political work I have seen others do, and the work I have been involved in myself? How could it be? What may political work look like in that case?

## **The web of all being**

The interrelatedness of all things is another aspect I would like to see more strongly reflected in my political work.

I wish to place the well-being of all living beings at the heart of my political ideals; this includes the well-being of all people, and also of plants and animals.

Furthermore, my understanding is more and more one of connectedness and interdependence. Interbeing, and the interdependent origin of all things, has come to be an important concept or approach to the world for me. I can begin to see how one could describe the world in terms of an ongoing process of all things continually bringing each other into being. This may have far-reaching consequences for my understanding of causality, and possible forms of influencing this interrelated whole.

In my previous political work I used to operate more with a concept of interaction between individual parts, which I had understood as interacting, but not as overlapping. How would it change, if I not only expanded my vision to include plants and animals as part of the aim, but also move from a model of interacting parts to that of an interbeing whole?

Such shifts in worldview may include shifts in my identity. For instance, I may come closer to seeing billions of years of evolution embedded in my body, to feeling kin to salamanders and sea anemones. I may see how the sun and the clouds are part of my survival, part of my life, and, if I choose to look at it that way, part of me.

Such changes in identity are likely to rebound on the way I wish to act in the world. For me, one resulting tendency was a reinforced commitment to co-operation and inclusiveness. If co-operation is not just an aim for a future society, but also means of political work right here and now, what could that look like? What consequences will a stronger identification with all actors involved have for political action, or even language?

## **New approaches to political work**

Values and approaches such as love, interbeing and co-operation could probably not be integrated into political work by adding another point to the agenda of a meeting. It might require a rethinking of the general way in which I, or we, approach the issue, our general way of going about things. How we identify and frame the issue, how we see our role and the role of others, what means and ways of action occur to us. What we think an action is, and what we think a result is. How we feel while we are working, and what it is we radiate out to others.

It would, in many respects, lead to a change in set-up, a new approach, in some ways perhaps even a change in paradigm as far as our political work is concerned.

- i Ray, Paul H.; Anderson, Sherry Ruth (2000): The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World, Three Rivers Press (New York)
- ii Paolo Freire (1970), Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Continuum (London, New York) p.40
- iii Ehrmann, Max (1976), The Desiderata of Happiness, Blue Mountain Arts (Boulder)