Moving into the Visionary Mode

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Some people see things as they are
and they ask: "why?"
Some people dream things that never were
and they ask: "why not?"
George Bernard Shaw

Moving into the visionary mode

How may we find our visions? How to spark the creativity within us that will let us see beyond what is into what might be?

I would like to list a few aspects here that I have found helpful.

1. Longer time horizon

The longer the time horizon I give myself, the larger the changes I can imagine. If I consider a timespan of two to five years, the visions that come to my mind will be relatively limited in scope, or relatively close to the present reality. If I start asking myself what society might be like in a hundred or two hundred years, different things may come to mind. Aspects that appear fixed, unchangeable in the short run suddenly become variables, changeable, if looked at over longer periods of time.

I have only recently come to realize how limited the time horizon is I usually give myself in my political work. It probably used to be a couple of years, a couple of decades at most. Often, it was even much less: until the next ministerial meeting, the date set for a refugee's deportation, the weeks after a disaster, the months until a campaign goal is to be achieved.

Sudden realization flashed through me in 2002, listening to a talk by Samir Amin,[i] in which he suggested that the next phase for our societies to move into may be socialism, and that the time horizon in which he sees that happening may be one or two hundred years. My mouth dropped. Such a statement would have been unthinkable in the environment I had come from not so long before, where neo-liberalism seemed an insurmountable fact, even to the people who opposed it. Yet, how come we could ever have believed it to be insurmountable? How can it happen that again and again we mistake a current state for the unchangeable order of the world? By hindsight, that state of things will turn out to have lasted a few decades. The Cold War lasted a few decades, yet when I grew up it felt and was presented as the grand order of things in this world. It ended, and before long neo-liberalism seemed to be the way of the world, to which there is no alternative. Looking back, neo-liberalism may have been in fashion for three or four decades. Whatever comes after it, will we treat it as the final and definite order of the world, or as a passing phase within a much larger and much more varied flow of human history?
So for one, I am suggesting that a perspective of centuries may enable us to envision much larger

or more profound changes. It may also make it easier to see the present not as a state, but as a passing phase. Change therefore becomes not only possible, but practically inexorable. Societies always change anyway, and large change happens over longer periods of time. There are always alternatives, and sooner or later one of them will come to pass. The question is more the nature the change will have, and the direction, and of course the best place for me to contribute.

I believe a longer time horizon can be helpful for political work, even though, of course, our concrete actions take place today, or even right here and now, in the present moment. There is nothing wrong at all with making short and medium term plans, plans for what we can do within a couple of years. Yet these plans may look different if we have the vast realm of centuries in the back of our minds and before our eyes when we make them.

It may take me an hour to plant an apple tree; yet I may never do it if I can not think in years and decades, and think ahead to a time where it will bear fruit.

image:[ii]
apple tree, planted years before the first harvest

The fruits of our political actions may take decades or centuries to ripen. We need a longer time horizon to be able to envisage such action; action that may not seem to do very much within our lifetimes, but that will be the seed for trees of centuries to come, or the founding stones of buildings to be erected slowly and steadily by future generations. Of course even for such action it will be important to consider short-term effects; at least they should do no harm, at best they are already pleasant and helpful in the present. The future is always uncertain; that to my mind just means we should not sacrifice ourselves (and certainly not others) for it in the present; it does not mean we should not think of the distant future at all. To the contrary, awareness of the distant future may increase our mobility and our serenity in the present moment considerably.

1.1. How to get to a longer time horizon

If a longer time horizon is so helpful for political action, then how can we move towards it?

Surely the mere thought as I have spelt it out here may help; a simple decision to broader one's horizon to encompass distant pasts and futures may get us a good way towards that aim.

However, it may also be that old habits stick with us, and that, inadvertently, the short term soon looms large again in our political thinking.

So it may be useful to find a few additional ways to practice the move towards a longer time horizon, so that this new horizon stands a better chance of also becoming a habit, a state of mind that comes to us naturally, automatically, without a conscious effort of reminiscence in each given situation.

1.2. Practising with the past

Practising with the past has proved a good exercise for me.

Sometimes we may feel that the area our political work focuses on is practically at a standstill. In spite of all our efforts, nothing much is moving; at best it can be compared to the slow, heavy, reluctant grinding of a heavy treadmill. It may seen doubtful if we'll ever get anywhere at all. Quite often when I had this impression, my time horizon was at a couple of years. Sometimes, the picture changed considerably when I expanded my horizon a hundred years into the past.

The school system may be such an example. It can seem like a very large, very slow institution, heaving a very heavy sigh at even the slightest attempt to change. Yet, looking back over the last hundred years, I can easily see that the changes have been enormous, and probably continuous, one small bit at a time. And over time, the whole huge system has moved very far, and very far in the direction I personally think desirable. Schools are generally open to both boys and girls, for instance. Corporal punishment has been abolished. If I compare a school of 1900 to one of today, I find the difference big indeed, and today's school infinitely preferable. A similar feeling comes to me with respect to gender roles. While I may be annoyed at things that did not get very far these last few years, a comparison with 1900 shows that the difference is astounding. Even the last fifty or sixty years may have brought changes that are enormous. For an organism as large as a society, the size of change at such a speed may be quite impressive.

picture: some picture of 1900; can be a statue or painting, even a building. a schoolroom. w busch

1.2.1. Journey to the origin

An exercise that has also helped me to expand my time horizon immensely is the guided meditation or dream "journey to the origin" suggested by Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown in "Coming Back to Life - work that reconnects".

This dream journey takes us back to the origin of the universe and of life on earth, following it through the aeons of its evolution. And I thought two hundred years are a long time.

Everything is dwarfed in comparison to the history of the earth, and the many life forms it has carried before the advent of humanity. I had never dreamed of expanding my time horizon that far.

In the "journey to the origin" it has become possible for me to do so because of the identification suggested: all life forms at all times are "we". It is a certain take on identity, which reaches beyond my individual person and beyond humanity towards the vast history and presence of life forms on earth, and towards the miracle of existence in the universe. The idea of seeing myself date back billions of years has opened a new time dimension for me.

image:[iii]
one of us still living the old way

Is it useful for political work to have a time horizon of several billion years?
I do not know. For me, it has changed my idea of who I am, and that probably does have implications for what I do, even if indirectly or unconsciously.

2. Separating vision from next steps

So I am suggesting that a longer time horizon in our political thinking may be one useful step to help us to get into a visionary mode, and to begin to be able to imagine what has never been, but might be.

What else might help?

It seems to me that being clear about the difference between "vision" and "next steps to take" can also be very useful. The two are very different, and the sticks or standards by which they are measured are different, and need to be different. Confusing these different standards is, to my mind, a fairly sure and quick way to kill both the vision and the short-term steps.

A vision measured by the standard of small steps will always be totally unrealistic. Small steps measured by the standard of vision will always be too small, too imperfect and insignificant. Thus, by measuring each with the standard of the other we can instantly bring ourselves to paralysis.

I believe it is important to have both vision and small steps, and to look at them separately, measuring each against it's own set of standards.

The vision needs to be allowed to fly high, to rise far above the horizon and to shine brightly in order to be clearly visible and to be able to act as a guiding star. This will give us direction. Then we can lower our eyes to the ground to see where there's a path and where there's water, and pick the place where we can set our foot in one first step, and then a second.

image[iv]

difference between the guiding star of a vision
and realistic next steps:
measuring each against its own standards

image[v]

First steps, small, concrete measures to be taken start relatively close to what exists in the present. They need to be realistic in a sense that does not apply to vision.

The vision, however, is not even necessarily a state to be achieved, not even at some hopeful point in the future. A guiding star can give direction, even if I will never arrive at the star. It may not even be the aim to arrive at the star. Nevertheless, the guidance is necessary and useful. Likewise, a vision of who we would like to be, and how we would like to live together on this earth, can guide us in our lives and our political work, irrespective of whether we'll ever reach that particular state envisaged.

The difference between the criteria for vision and for small steps may be obvious when presented in theory. In practice, however, I feel it does need a certain amount of concentration to keep this awareness alive, and to apply it in the moment where it is needed. It seems to me that we not so infrequently curb our visionary thinking by applying criteria of realism to it that don't really belong there. Let the vision fly high; realism comes in when we are talking about steps to take.

This may be a bit like the method of brainstorming at meetings many of us may be familiar with. Brainstorming is the phase where all ideas are allowed to come up, and they are added to the blackboard without judgement or commentary. It is important to postpone discussion of ideas to a later stage. Only that way, the creativity of that first stage of the process has the room it needs to unfold.

It may be similar with our ability to formulate political visions. While we are still at the stage of letting our guiding star rise, of dreaming and choosing the general direction in which we wish to move, we are allowed and even advised to let go of the present for a while. There is little need for concern at this stage whether the general direction we choose by letting our star rise is one in which it is possible to move. One can not know beforehand. We will find that out once we have lowered our eyes to the ground, and see where it is or is not possible to make one step. The path may become visible while we are walking; who can know beforehand whether the first step will lead to a second and a third, and what they will be? Detours may be necessary; and they, again, will only become visible while we are walking.

So for our political work, that may mean it is important to create rooms with the atmosphere of brainstorming, where visions can be formulated without an immediate argument about whether and how they can be achieved. Perhaps they can be achieved, perhaps they can not, and even if they can't they may still have been a very useful point of orientation for a movement that was possible.

However, even in the freest state of visionary imagination, surely it makes sense to accept some limits set by reality, does it not? For instance, people need to eat; it wouldn't make sense to imagine they do not, would it?

Which limits do we choose to accept as given even at that stage of free, high-flying imagination?

I have found that a rather intricate question. I would like to give an example here, as a means of playfully examining the limits each of us sets personally to the realm of the real within which even utopias have to remain.

3. Let's be realistic: the example of cosmic energy

The story I would like to retell here goes something like this:

> There is a form of cosmic energy that is present in the most powerful forces of nature, as well as being the essence of human thought. It has of course been omnipresent for aeons, and has been known to humans, but only to some singular individuals, or small groups of initiates. Knowledge of this form of energy has been preserved in ancient writings, passed on through the centuries, but has remained esoteric, little known. However, once attention is turned seriously towards that energy, humans can discover its nature, and learn to channel and use it. This energy can be touched into practically everywhere, and can be used for practically anything: it can do hard labour, it allows humans to communicate across time and space, it can create warmth and cold and light and motion and many other things. Once humans will be fully apt in the use of this cosmic energy, many ancient problems of scarcity or hardship can be solved easily.

For me personally, that sort of story is beyond what I am prepared to allow for when setting the frame within which my visions and utopias develop.

Except that... it has already happened. And I can see the result every day, in my life. It's called electricity.
Electricity is a form of cosmic energy that is inherent in the most powerful forces of nature, such as thunder and lightening, and it also appears to be how impulses are transmitted within the human nervous system, including the brain. It has been known since antiquity, and that knowledge has been transmitted, also in written form, but has never caused much interest outside a very small group of scholars, philosophers or alchemists. Probably no one connected the force of lightening with having soft light in your house on winter evenings, or the sparks on a cat's fur with a possibility of moving heavy loads. I was struck when I realised how very recent the serious exploration of electricity and its uses was: with intensifying research in the 18th century, the actual use of electricity only began around 1880. That's very recent. And we are still in the middle of our discovery of all the things electricity an do. We've found out about illuminating houses on winter evenings, and also about heating and cooling, and moving loads like trains, or creating electric motors. We're in the middle of finding out about electricity-powered transmission of voices and images and all kinds of others things by encoding them intermittently as ones and zeros. We have also found a number of ways to create or gather that form of energy: from wind blowing, from water flowing, from the sun shining, from fires burning; perhaps also from the ocean heaving, or from special stones falling apart at an accelerated pace. If anyone had suggested that as part of our political vision of how societies might function I would no doubt have excluded that possibility. Turning the blowing wind into light, or the flowing river into warmth, or sunshine to moving heavy loads is pure sorcery; and while I like that in novels, I do not include it in political vision.

So. A large part of a story that I was inclined to reject as unrealistic has already come true.
What does that tell me about my approach to visionary thinking?

What limits do I in fact set? How am I defining the realm of the "real" or the "realistic" within which my utopia has to find its place? How restrictive am I, how restrictive do I wish to be?

My example has come from a technical (or magical?) area. I may currently be setting restrictions in other areas as well. One such area may be assumptions I make, consciously or unconsciously, about human nature. For instance, I may assume that people will always be selfish. Or that people will always think of themselves as individual selves.

Which assumptions am I making at the moment, in what area? Are they the ones I wish to make, the ones that are most helpful?

4. Realism, yearning and caution

There may be other aspects needing attention when we are looking at the question of where we draw the boundaries of "the realistic" for the development of vision.

What makes us draw the boundaries at one point rather than another? What sorts of resistance may we face within ourselves when we are trying to move them?

There is little point in endlessly pining for something that simply cannot be achieved. It is very reasonable, from that perspective, to close certain chapters, and to get on with what is feasible.

> Grant us the serenity to accept the things I cannot change
> the courage to change the things I can
> and the wisdom to know the difference[vi]

These lines, adopted as guidance by many self-help groups, do make perfect sense to me. One tricky part in real life is indeed "knowing the difference". When we have categorised something as "can not be changed", we may resist attempts by others to go and try again. The more we care about the issue at hand, the more it has hurt to accept its categorisation as "can't be changed", the stronger our resistance may be; because we do not wish to re-experience the pain that unchangeability has already caused us.

This can lead to situations that may seem a little absurd: we are resisting the fulfilment of our deepest wishes. And the deeper and stronger the wish, the more determined is our resistance. We may seem to be standing adamantly in the way of our own happiness. And indeed perhaps we are.

Yet that becomes very understandable if looked at in the light of the above. If we are right, and the thing desired is indeed unattainable, then it is very sensible of us to stop trying. We would waste our energies and just keep hurting ourselves. However, if it is indeed attainable, and so important to us, then we are fools to resist the attempt. Hence, the hinge may often be the wisdom to know the difference.

Or to find ways to accommodate for our fears of being hurt and disappointed. To find ways of exploring and broadening the realm of what we consider (and therefore make) possible. For especially within social systems, what is possible and attainable of course depends an awful lot on our own expectations, beliefs and behaviours. It depends on us, the parts of that system. If we can find ways to carefully provide for our fears, we may dare to look at things that we have hitherto resisted.

We may, for example, explore paths that allow an indirect approach to our wishes. For instance, by talking about them as if they were fictional, or metaphorical; or also, by pointing to things that have happened in some other place or time (but may not be possible here and now).
Frank Barrett and David Cooperrider have given an example on the use of generative metaphor intervention in Appreciative Inquiry, taking people on a study trip to another organisation, so that that organisation could become the image people used. This allowed them to move on from a situation where they had been unable to talk about their own organisation directly.[vii] Even identifying very small aspects or instances we like about the present can be a good way to get moving.

Gervase Bushe, also drawing on his experience in organizational development and Appreciative Inquiry, writes about difficulties that can be experienced when trying to get into a visionary mode in an organisation or group setting:

> "Indeed, if there is a lot of repressed yearning in a system, anyone who names what is yearned for is sure to be ridiculed and shamed as a defence against experiencing that yearning."[viii]

So not every context or every moment may be right for moving directly into exploring our visions. That may be true for our office as well as for our political imagination. However, when we do find the doorway through which to move, the results may be more than rewarding.

Gervase Bushe continues:

> "I have found that an appreciative inquiry, where people listen to each other's stories about micro moments in organizational life where the best in us is touched, can create a unique climate for collective dreaming where the forces of ridicule and repression are momentarily suspended." [ix]

5. Looking for paths not obstacles

For moving into a visionary, creative, imaginative mode with our political thinking I have so far suggested to aim for a longer time horizon, to keep a clear distinction between vision and first small steps, to reconsider the realm of the "real" or "realistic" within which we are placing our visions, and to take care of our fears of disappointed hopes and unfulfilled yearning.

There is another suggestions I would like to introduce to help us move into a visionary mode with our political thinking. This is essentially to make conscious decision to look for what might work, rather than for what might go wrong. If we are trying to create visions, it may be helpful to look for territory rather than boundaries, for paths rather than obstacles.

There is of course something to be said for a critical reflection on the potential difficulties. However, if we focus too much or too early on obstacles, we may fail to see the path.

It may be a question of balance, or it may be one of phasing. In any case, it seems recommendable to me to shift the focus towards possibilities while we are trying to strengthen our visionary capacity.

Also, I recommend to cultivate the awareness of what it is I am doing at any given moment, what mode I am in fact using. Listening to myself, do I feel I am looking for things that might go right? Or, rather, for things that might go wrong? Where is my focus, in practice, at that moment, and is that the mode most helpful for what I am trying to do?

If in the past my spontaneous reaction to a new idea was to look for possible faults or obstacles, a change of habits may be required to get me into a visionary mode. Perhaps also a change in my assumptions about how things and theories progress.

6. Dreams come true

There is one more suggestion I would like to make as to what might help us to move into a visionary mode with our political thinking. That is increased attention to the visions that have already become reality, to the dreams come true.
Realising that in the past, dreams have come true may well encourage us to dream some more.

It may be that we generally pay very little attention to our past successes. Perhaps we tend to treat what is already there as obvious, as given, and pay attention mostly to shortcomings. Being aware of visions that have come true (even partially, imperfectly) may increase our awareness of the possibility of visions coming true. If it has happened before, it may well happen again. Universal suffrage, for instance, was a utopian vision not so long ago, and so was the type of social security system in place in Europe today. Yet today, how often do we pause to marvel at what has been achieved?

Let's do it more often, I'd suggest. For one, because it is likely to be a very agreeable activity and get us into a mood of appreciation and generally high spirits, and secondly, because it is likely to enhance our capacity to be pro-active, visionary political agents, envisioning changes that go far beyond the present phase and having both the foresight and the patience to take meaningful action here and now.

i Amin, Samir (2002): talk entitled "Dialectics of Globalization", given on 7th Sepember 2002 at the celebration of the 20th anniversary of ASPR in Stadtschlaining, Austria.
ii source of image: www.pixelio.de: 136535 by Reinhold G.
iii source of image: www.pixelio.de: 366415 by Stefan Berger
iv source of image: www.pixelio.de: 399630 by Dieter Schütz
v source of image: www.pixelio.de: 371593 by einzmedia
vi http://www.aahistory.com/prayer.html [29 march 2010]
vii Barrett, Frank J.; Cooperrider, David L. (2001)Generative Metaphor Intervention: A New Approach for Working with Systems Divided by Conflict and Caught in Defensive Perception, in: Cooperrider, D. L., Sorensen, P. F., Yaeger, T. (Eds.) (2001): Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for Organisational Devleopment Champaign, IL (Stipes), Chapter 7.
viii Bushe, G. (1999): Five theories of change embedded in appreciative inquiry. In: Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking human organization toward a positive theory of change, Champaign, (Stipes), p. 2
ix Bushe, G. (1999): Five theories of change embedded in appreciative inquiry. In: Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking human organization toward a positive theory of change, Champaign, (Stipes), p. 2