

Filling Vision With Power

A vision is more than a word. Words can be a good point of entry, if we use them the right way. They can lead us on into ever more detail and force of imagination, making us feel and breathe the vision, making it come alive and helping us to bring a desired future into the present. Well-known methods such as utopian novels can be expanded into role-playing or daydreaming, bringing a dimension of deliberate structural change into areas where one may not have suspected it so far. One such area may also be wishbooks and other New Thought teachings; if the collective and structural dimensions are integrated into existing approaches, they can perhaps provide helpful inspiration, and not only warning examples.

1.1. Naming visions

How can we discover what our visions are, first as a general direction, but then also with detail and with the fire they need to influence lived reality? One good starting point to me seems language. In "Five Theories of Change embedded in Appreciative Inquiry", Gervase Bushe takes a constructivist worldview as a starting point, and then proceeds to the importance words have in shaping our reality, and the significance of incorporating words in popular usage. In the context of organisational development and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an approach, he says:

"Those familiar with AI know that the dominant theoretical rational for AI is post modernist European philosophy (for an excellent summary related to this theory of change see Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995). From this point of view there is nothing inherently real or true about any social form. All social organization is an arbitrary, social construction. Our ability to create new and better organizations is limited only by our imagination and collective will. Furthermore, language and words are the basic building blocks of social reality. Rather than seeing language as a passive purveyor of meaning between people, post modernists see language as an active agent in the creation of meaning. As we talk to each other, we are constructing the world we see and think about, and as we change how we talk we are changing that world. From this perspective, theory, especially theory that is encoded in popular words or images, is a powerful force in shaping social organization because we "see what we believe". Creating new and better theories / ideas / images is, therefore, a powerful way of changing organizations. Appreciative inquiry seeks these new images in and among people's best intentions and noblest aspirations, attempting a collective envisioning of what the group could be at its very best."¹

He then goes on to say: "...the key to creating change in the organization is creating new theories/ideas/images that enter the everyday language of system members. Therefore, both the process of creative ideation and the process of importation of that creativity into popular usage are critical for change."²

What Gervase Bushe says here about organisational development could also indicate possibilities for approaching change in even larger collective contexts. Of course the words we use in political contexts entail concepts and theories. What would happen if we tried to move our words, and with them the pattern of our thinking, in the direction of vision?

Let me take the term "racism" as an example. It entails certain concepts, theories or assumptions, points to certain frames of reference - and is generally a term for something that we do not wish to see in society, something we would wish to see decrease or, ideally, disappear altogether.

What is the term that describes what we would like to see instead? What is the name of the thing we'd like to see emerge, that we would like to see more of? I am opposed to racism, and I am in favour of...? Tolerance, acceptance, equality, equal treatment, multiculturalism, diversity, openness, love, humanism... all these terms and many more are possible candidates. Each of them carries a whole range of meanings, of connotations, of surroundings ideas and concepts. It therefore does matter which ones we choose.

That seems to me to be one good point of entry for political groups. Within our groups, we can explore what words might capture our visions, what attracts us to them, which layers of meaning they have for us, which connotations or qualities. To pick an example from the list given above: what does „acceptance“ mean to me, if that is a word I choose?

- Why is that close to my heart? What inspires me about it?
- What does it mean if incorporated into everyday practice?
- Have I seen that value embodied or acted upon before? When, where?
- What factors may be conducive to such occurrences?
- How can such factors be brought about or strengthened?
- What influence does everyday practice based on that value have on formal institutions?
- Likewise, how can formal institutions be shaped to embody or encourage practice of that value?

Exploring such questions together in political groups can lead into deep exchanges and new insights. This includes the relation of different values to each other. For instance, how might equality and multiculturalism inform each other? Where are we looking at different aspects or levels of the same general vision, where are several visions about to emerge?

The dynamic created in such exchanges can lead both the group and the individuals within it into a better and deeper understanding of what visions they hold. Consistency may increase as well as commitment, the level of detail and imagination as well as that of analysis and structural coherence.

1.2. Filling Visions with Power

So one starting point for political groups may be to try to find a word for what is desired, to name it - and to discuss these suggested names in the group, exploring the deeper meanings and connotations they have for each member.

To start by looking at our use of language may be an approach that comes relatively easy to us. It may feel familiar, as does the realm of the verbal, analytical, rational and intellectual from where it takes us onto our journey.

Political agency, in my view, will need other levels in addition; for instance, levels of emotion and inner power. Here the difference begins to show between a free floating idea and true inspiration, between a mere word and a construct that is strong enough for us to live in.

How can we move from a spoken word to a deep-seated conviction, a feeling about the world that comes naturally, easily, without conscious effort? Once I have moved into that state, action embodying my idea or ideal will flow naturally; the implications for and application to any particular situation will occur to me easily, intuitively, without a previous requirement to stop, think about my principles, and figure out what they might mean. The ease and speed of application increases. It may also entail a certain energy, serenity and sense of aliveness (perhaps the opposite of burn-out?) that make it easy to keep going and to let an ongoing process ripen in its own time.

What gets attention gains power

Giving our time, energy and attention to what we wish to emerge (rather than to what we wish to disappear) may already make quite a difference. "What gets attention gains power" suggests itself as one possible wording to express this idea. The point could be argued from a constructivist perspective, saying that things we mention become part of the thinkable world. Things that are mentioned very often become habitual; perhaps the world even becomes unthinkable without them. Constructs gain power from repeated citation. Repetition and citation, generally, appear to be essential features for the continued existence and strengthening of discourses and constructs.

However, repetition is not the only means by which constructs are filled with power. Academic constructivist writing has explored various tools that might be helpful, and other sources of social knowing have also explored ways to make the transition from a purely mental and conceptual level to a level from where action arises spontaneously. Therapeutic and spiritual traditions have developed techniques ranging from meditation to psychodrama in order to support people in this type of process. They may help me, for instance, to move from a state where I know I need not be afraid to a state where I actually am not afraid. This type of transition, in my view, will have relevance both on an individual and a collective level. Our political visions, too, may need this move from pure thought to a deep-seated conviction, and on to a spontaneously lived experience.

Paul Watzlawick is one of those who have tried to see the implications of constructivism for our everyday lives and actions, and to explore possible applications of a constructivist approach, mostly in a therapeutic context. Some of his best-known examples show how our negative expectations can produce the correspondingly negative outcomes. For instance, if I am convinced that nobody likes me, I may behave in such a miserable, grumpy way that indeed people prefer to avoid me.³ However, in his writings on "self-fulfilling prophesies", he also gives examples that work the other way around, and of course, for our purposes here, it may be most interesting to reflect on the potential of positive expectations to bring about positive outcomes. Watzlawick refers to the "pygmalion effect" as studied in educational settings:⁴ If teachers have positive expectations of their students, students do indeed perform better. The pygmalion effect is also referred to by David Cooperrider in one of his classic articles on Appreciative Inquiry: "Positive Image, Positive Action"⁵. He discusses the power of positive imagery in general, and points to other well-known examples such as the placebo effect in medicine. While Appreciative Inquiry is rooted in organisational development, a number of other academic fields have seen moves towards a conscious focus on the desirable as well, each outlining their own rationales for such an approach. Most prominent among them are perhaps Positive Psychology and Salutogenesis.

What can a focus on the desirable look like for political groups? What methods could be used to fill emerging visions with power?

I would like to point to some possible paths here, starting with a relatively well-known one, coming from the realm usually classified as arts: novels.

1.2.1. Novels

One very good and well-known way of infusing political visions with energy are utopian novels.

This includes writing and reading novels, daydreaming about them, recounting the best episodes to a friend, re-enacting them as role-play or inventing further episodes, additional details and different endings.

Many of us may have done that as children: taken favourite scenes or characters from a novel or a movie and played with them. Fantasised about them, or enthusiastically repeated the best bits to friends who knew them equally well and who were equally enthusiastic about them. Role-played in the courtyard, re-enacted particular scenes, or, more likely, adapted them and invented new ones. This way, we made them more and more our own.

The emotion is sparked by the original novel or movie; we already love the characters, fear the dangers, explore the secrets. Novels and movies can kick-start us, both by giving us ideas, but also by giving us passion. Our passion can carry us forward into further dreaming and envisioning, and we can develop our own version and vision in a way that we would perhaps never have done without that initial enthusiasm.

Some of us may feel inspired to write their own novel, or to answer to an existing one by writing a response. Edward Bellamy wrote his utopian novel "Looking backward"⁶ in 1888, and did not only sell a surprisingly high number of copies, but he also inspired others, including critics, to respond with a novel of their own.⁷

This principal idea of responding to existing novels is also available in smaller portions. For instance, I was quite impressed by the enormous amount of fan-fiction people wrote for the Harry Potter universe⁸. Also by how direct and undisguised the presentation of myths and personal dreams was, how far from the original people strayed without the slightest hesitation, and how little people allowed themselves to be inhibited by ideas of what "good writing" consists of.

If we take that kind of unencumbered energy and bring in into our process of creating visions for a good life on earth, it could both be a lot of fun and a real fountain of creativity.

This includes the possibility of dealing with problems or open questions in our utopia, by the way. A lot of fan-fiction includes drama. This can also be the personal drama of two or three people acting out a general problem befalling utopia, or acting out our own doubt or lack of clarity regarding particular questions. When our heroes and heroines have made their way to a happy ending, we may also be clearer about what our utopia looks like.

As adults, we sometimes allow our creativity and even our enthusiasm to be dampened by notions of professionalism or, indeed, adulthood. Some corners are carefully carved out where that is not so, and where adults can draw pictures or act out stories unconcernedly.

1.2.2. Role-Playing

Role-playing seems to be one of these areas to me. At least in Europe, there is a trend of role-playing for adults, and not only as computer games. There are pen-and-paper games, where people sit around a table telling stories, each one enacting a particular character in a group of adventurers.⁹ There are live action role playing games, where people glue on the pointed ears of the elves, wrap themselves in a wizard's cloak and spend a weekend together in an old castle, enacting their character day and night, going through the adventure together.¹⁰ It's a bit like improvisational theatre without an audience, except that the setting and the characters are defined beforehand, and the organisers usually design a rough plot, such as hiding a treasure somewhere and leaving hints.

As far as I have seen, neither the pen-and-paper nor the live action role playing games are commonly used to enact political utopias. However, they easily could be. If we combine the creativity, enthusiasm and playfulness of these role players with the experience and techniques of working with systemic/family constellations, from psychodrama or from role playing in a therapeutic setting, it may bring very interesting results indeed. Therapeutic or personal growth settings can bring a level of reflection, introspection and care in dealing with emotional stirrings that may well complement the

egalitarian, joyful and self-empowered setting of the role players. This could become a hotbed for the creation of new myths, new identities, and new political imagination.

Theatre, of course, has long ago been discovered for political agency. Not only by staging plays with explicit or implicit references to current political issues, but also by involving the audience. Many of the forms popular in Europe today are based on forms suggested by Augusto Boal.¹¹ For instance, in variations of Forum Theatre, actors will play a short scene, taken from everyday life. The stage can be in any place where people are gathered: a school room, a local town hall, or a corner of the market place. Within that scene of five minutes, there is some conflict, or quarrel, or seriously unfair or unsatisfactory outcome for one of the characters. That same scene is then played again and again, but each time someone from the audience can choose to step into the shoes of one of the characters in the scene, and act differently. That way the scene develops differently each time, and people have a very intensive way of testing out possible strategies of behaviour in difficult situations, and a stage for developing new ones.

Another path, one that may also start out as role-playing, but then takes a different turn, is walked by parts of the queer community. Trying out different types of identity, including a switch, confusion or creation of gender identities, is something that may start as play and fun, take on the form of art and performance on stage, or of everyday practice. Trying out different clothes and new hairstyles and make-up, mask and costume are important ingredients, as is body language and the creation of unusual set-ups in physical space. Theoretical analysis may intertwine with arts and irony and lived experience. Condensed versions of this may be experienced at festivals and conferences, for instance at the thematic weekend "Lust am Verrat" at brut in Vienna in January 2008.¹²

1.2.3. Dream Journeys

For those of us who find full-sized live action role playing in castles or changing identities in real life a little too daunting, day-dreaming might do. All the re-enactment and invention of new scenes and characters can also be done alone, in one's head (which is perhaps where true adventures happen, anyway). Day-dreaming can also have this power of letting the vision come alive in me, of making it far more than a dry thought, much closer to a lived reality. All the creativity and the creation of energy can take place here, the addition of detail, the settling down into deeper spheres of my being. Virtual realities, from chats to Second Life, could also play an important role here, providing a safe space to experiment, also in interaction with others.

From day-dreaming one may also move towards guided meditation or dream journeys. There is again a wealth of experience and tools available from the areas of therapy, personal development and spiritual groups. The move towards applying these methods to political and structural issues is one that has already begun. Work with constellations, for instance, has been adapted to be helpful not only for family dynamics, but also for environmental¹³ and other political issues.

Strands of the environmental movement, such as Deep Ecology, have developed both guidelines and practice groups using dream journeys, guided meditation, constellations, creative painting and group exercises for their work on our collective structures. Joanna Macy may be one of the most prominent figures in that context. Together with Molly Young Brown, she has published a series of exercises for groups under the title "Coming Back to Life: Work that Reconnects"¹⁴. It includes guided meditations as well as micro-roleplays, exploring emotions as well as creative forms of mapping possible next steps.

There is a whole community of people practising not only these exercises, but several related approaches as well. Ecovillages such as Sieben Linden¹⁵ in Germany or Findhorn in Scotland¹⁶ seem to be focal points for the emergence of groups and the dissemination of practices, not least by seminars, courses and experience weeks held in the ecovillage, giving people inspiration they take back to their circle of friends at home.

1.3. New Thought

1.3.1. New Thought manifestation of wishes

Among the strands of thinking or spiritual practice that have recently seen a fresh wave of popularity are several that stress the power of our thoughts, wishes and inner energies to shape reality. Ronda Bynre's "The Secret" and other references to the Law of Attraction could be cited here, as well as Bärbel Mohr's "Bestellungen beim Universum" and similar guidance on how to focus on one's wishes in ways that will lead to fulfilment. I will refer to this body of varied, but nevertheless closely related approaches by using the term "New Thought", since I understand that to be the tradition from which they arise.

A number of exercises are also suggested by New Thought literature: from pinning up a symbol of your dream at your desk to a sequence of steps to be followed to make your dreams come true.

Personally, while I have serious problems with some aspects of New Thought, what I find potentially helpful are some of the suggestions made for filling visions with power. The steps suggested vary, but tend to include the following:¹⁷

-) Name your wish

Instructions on how to name your wish are very helpful, I find. A major point is to make it a pure affirmation, free of wordings like "not", "less of", "no more". The universe supposedly does not hear negations - and the human subconscious may not do so, either¹⁸.

Transferring that idea to a political context, it would mean that wishing for an end to war would not be a feasible way of going about it; we would have to wish for peace. In essence, this links back to the language proposal on naming visions I have made at the beginning of this chapter.

-) Give it emotion and affirmation

Affirmation is a guiding principle for the next point, also. Do not wish, sigh, and long. We long for what we do not have, and if that is the predominant emotional mode I am in, then this is what I will feed into my dream, and it is what I will get: more longing.

Instead, I am encouraged to get into the mood of fulfilment. What does the realisation of my dream feel like? What is there, how do I indulge in every bit of it, cherish every little aspect, enjoy each facet? The idea is to wear that smile on my face right now, have that twinkle in my eye already.

-) Let go

Then I just stay in the happy mood, and otherwise let go of the thought. Instructions say I do not need to form ideas about the path, the how, the means by which my dream will be fulfilled. Finding those is the job of the universe. My job is to stay tuned to the feeling of fulfilment.

I find that a very interesting suggestion. It contrasts with what we usually do, for instance in project management: after a stage of identifying goals, we tend to move on to concrete steps to be taken for implementation: how, by whom, until when, a fairly detailed form of planning, determining the way in which things are supposed to happen.

While there are fairly obvious arguments to be made in support of such an approach, I find it interesting to consider the suggestion that it may also be possible the other way around. Perhaps precisely because I develop no action plan whatsoever, but stay happily connected with the fulfilment of my dream, things start coming towards me. Or rather (I would think) they have always been there, but now

I notice them. If I am in a happy, relaxed mood I am more likely to engage in pleasant conversations here and there, cast a glance at things happening by the roadside, chat with a stranger in a queue. Since my fulfilled dream is still present as a constant undertone in my half- or sub-conscious, I begin relating all manner of things I encounter to it. And suddenly I realize that the magazine I've always seen lying there, or a person I've always known, or the side remark by that stranger presents a wonderful route to my destination. New Thought literature sometimes gives metaphysical explanations of how this works. However, for me personally, rather traditional psychological explanations seem perfectly sufficient. That an open, relaxed mind, a happy mood and a loose background presence of a particular topic produce creative ideas, and can make me see opportunities that otherwise I might have missed seems very plausible to me.

New Thought instructions, in that perspective, give me a good guideline, a method to help me reach that desirable state of an open mind and a relaxed, happy presence of my intention.

We could try that out in our political work. Focus on what it is we desire, fill that with energy and life and emotion, and then let go, and remain in that happy state of ensured fulfilment, letting ourselves be surprised by the ways and the ease with which realisation comes to us.

Two aspects still seem important to me at this point. One is that fulfilment includes agency, an aspect usually mentioned in New Thought literature. Bärbel Mohr sometimes calls this acceptance of the delivery: the universe puts before my nose what I have ordered - if I then don't stretch out my hand and take it, it will go away again. In an example she gives she was stranded at a train station on a way to a conference, without the name of the hotel she was supposed to go to or a telephone number to call. While looking around the station, a strange-looking woman immediately caught her attention; but it was only just before that woman left, that Bärbel Mohr hit on the idea of asking her - and finding out that she was going to the same conference, hence the same hotel, and could even offer her a ride there.¹⁹

So if New Thought approaches increase our openness to promptings, making use of the opportunities present is also still a requirement.

Another important aspect seems to me how detailed the wish to be fulfilled is. The general idea of leaving the implementation, the way in which it is going to happen, to the universe, seems very attractive to me. The distinction between what is my wish and what is an idea for implementation, however, is perhaps not always easy to make. Do I wish for a happy love life, or do I wish for that particular person to call me tonight, at eight? I may be walking right past my true love if I am so fixed on getting that other rendez-vous to happen, I would think. If I can remain open, and focused on the deeper levels of my wishing, more paths towards fulfillment become possible.

I see this as analogous to recommendations made in numerous conflict transformation or communication trainings: separate needs from strategies. I may have a particular idea of how my need is going to be met, and then am fixed on getting it done that way, becoming blind to others. I also may get into unnecessary conflicts with people when our respective strategies clash - while our needs do not. My hunger does not clash with your hunger - it is only the circumstance that both our strategies focus on the last bit of cake on the table that creates a problem. If at least one of us remembers that the need is for food, we may also begin to see options beyond that particular bit of cake.

It seems to me that a part of New Thought literature suggests a rather narrow focus in that respect. Surely a car, a house, a parking space, a phone call are just particular ideas of how a need could be met? Strategies, rather than the needs I am trying to meet through these strategies?

In political work, too, I believe that often we might benefit from taking one or two steps back, trying to remember what our aim is and what is only one (out of several possible) strategies. For instance, do we need to create jobs? Do we need jobs, or do we need food, shelter and an opportunity to contribute and grow - and jobs are just the way we are trying to organise all that at the moment? A strategy? That would suggest that there probably are other strategies also, and we may wish to have a look around to see if other strategies might work better in the current situation, or could complement what we have. Another example: Do I wish for a particular policy to increase access to higher schooling? That policy

probably is only one of several ways to make schools accessible. Furthermore, formal schools are only one way to education, and education is only one way to improve access to a good life. Opening up towards deeper and deeper levels seems helpful to me.

What could all that mean on the level of a Western civil society group? It may be something to bear in mind when talking about vision, and when trying to fill it with power, for instance through visualisation. This is one reason why I find novels, theatre, role playing and daydreams useful tools: they provide lots of detail, which is important for getting a feel of the vision, and of raising all the emotion that fills the vision with power. Yet, at the same time, it remains clear that all the detail was just an illustration, a possible example. There still is a lot of room for analogy, and for development. The level at which we place our power then is not the detail, but the general idea for which the detail is an example, just one possible form of implementation. So we may use detail with great enthusiasm, but playfully, never clinging to it or taking it for the aim rather than an illustration. Being both detailed and open about our vision is an art that we may choose to develop. Determining details for of a political utopia, rather than playing around with them, is a bit scary (even if you leave the details of the road to it to the universe). If the blue-print for the utopian result is ready-made, that leaves little space for other people to add their bits.

Also on a more short-term, practical level, my inclination as a civil society actor at the moment is to have less expectations as to concrete forms my actions or their outcome should take. I am trying to keep my intention with the general direction in which I would wish society to move. What my particular role in that movement shall be is up to the universe. Should I write or give workshops or build a compost toilet or meditate or phone a politician - there are so many possibilities, and all have their merits. If I let myself be guided by what feels easy and appealing to me at the moment, by what seems pleasure rather than duty, I may be most open to the possibilities in my surroundings and my own abilities, and thus drift naturally to the place where I am most helpful (and most satisfied).

So perhaps the conclusion is to try and keep the energy at the deeper level of the vision, and the trust, too, and therefore to be very relaxed about the things happening or not happening closer to the surface. If there is to be a demonstration with thousands of people coming, so be it. If there is only a dozen, so be it. If I am invited to speak before a group of people I had never dreamed of asking, so be it. If a group I had always thought most sympathetic does not want to hear from me, so be it. Going with the flow, trusting that there are ways in which I can bring my contribution into the world, and not fighting to make any particular one happen.

-) Meanwhile, act from happiness and abundance.

Bärbel Mohr suggests that while we are waiting for the parcel to arrive at our home, for the universe to deliver what we have ordered, we might offer people a place before us in the queue at the supermarket, smile at strangers and give flowers to our lovers. Being filled with a mood of abundance, relaxation and generosity, and radiating all that, seems highly desirable to me - even irrespective of its role in the materialisation of dreams. Taking small actions that represent that state of being may be a really useful tool to keep me in that mood myself, in addition to spreading it to others. Nothing impresses me more than the things I do myself. The causal link between my mood and my actions may not be a one-way street, no more than that between my mood and my body language. In both instances, I can influence or strengthen my mood by assuming the appropriate posture or body language, or by engaging in the small actions that belong to that mood.

Of course, in both instances I will have to be sensitive to what is within my range. Smiling at a stranger (or a lover) works best if the smile comes from inside. If there is no smile anywhere to be found inside, then perhaps I shouldn't insist. If I am trying to pull myself too far from where I currently am I may just lose myself. Sometimes authenticity may also mean that I hang my head and cry.

1.3.2. New Thought and Political Agency

If New Thought approaches are to be helpful in supporting political agency, I believe a number of issues have to be considered rather carefully. What I would like to do here is to point out some of the major factors which, to my mind, frequently give rise to irritations, and which in any case may need to be kept in mind when looking for possible productive analogies or transfers of New Thought approaches to political agency and to the transformation of our collective structures.

1.3.3. From individual to collective

New Thought materials often give advice on how to lead a happy or successful life as an individual. The question I am interested here is whether any of the methods or approaches used by New Thought can be translated to a collective level. What might be needed to make some of them helpful for political agency, or at least to avoid some of the pitfalls that may be inherent in an exclusive focus on the individual?

Three aspects seem to deserve particular attention in moving from an individual to a collective level and to a broader, more systemic perspective. These are the shifts

- from individual action to collective action
- from individual happiness to the happiness of all
- from success within a framework to changing the framework

Below I will comment in a bit more detail on these three aspects, before saying a word on the metaphysics suggested by New Thought, and on assumptions as to what it may be that we wish for.

From individual action to collective action

Many New Thought books and materials assume that you are practising on you own. They are guidelines for creating reality through individual action, through changes in one's own individual pattern of thought.

The film "The Secret" gives the example of a gay man who felt disliked in his office, harassed and ridiculed for being gay. However, as soon as he started to accept himself and be happy, and to jokingly respond to comments made by his colleagues, people began to like him very well, and soon he became truly popular for his good sense of humour. He no longer encountered harassment or ridicule, and the final scene in that part of the film shows him in front of a red velvet curtain, cracking jokes about being a very, very gay man, and bowing to applause, finally successful.

I believe that it is indeed possible to have an individual power of definition that is so strong that you manage to single-handedly turn around a whole office. Such power is rare, however, and can in no way being taken for granted. For most of us most of the time, it is important to have sources of support.

"The Secret" could easily have followed this story with a sequence on a gay pride parade, which is, to my mind, precisely the same approach, but on a collective level. This would have shown that you don't have to "do it all on your own". We can do it together, and in fact this is what happens. People do indeed support one another in gaining the sort of confidence and positive self-image referred to, and we are helping one another into relaxation, humour and strength.

Adding such a sequence to “The Secret” would, in my view, have helped to ensure that the message of the film is not interpreted in highly unhelpful ways. The way it is set at the moment, one might even read it as saying: “Discrimination does not exist – so-called discrimination is a purely personal problem of people who do not accept themselves and refuse to be happy.” From there, one might even go on to interpret it as saying: “No one can help them. They can only help themselves, and if they don’t do that, that is their own decision and responsibility. In any case, there is no need to look at anyone else’s behaviour or attitude, nor at laws, institutions or structures of society.”

As long as that kind of implicit message can be read out of New Thought materials, I find it unsurprising if it is met with rejection or aggression on a personal level, and labelled reactionary on a political level.

It may be important to remember that problems are not necessarily caused by the person(s) suffering from the effects. Furthermore, problems can sometimes be solved by persons who did not create them (whether or not they are the ones suffering from the effects). Being aware of our individual power in no way entails a need to veil our ability to support each other, and to influence each other’s circumstances. If I believe that all things constantly co-create each other, such a perspective will be automatically included.

Collective visions of well-being?

A number of other interesting questions arise with an attempt to move New Thought approaches towards collective agency. Many of them are analogous to questions familiar from debates within various political groups. If we are acting collectively, will we have a collective wish or vision, as well? Or is it enough if our visions are pointing, very roughly, in the same direction? Or are we even able to support each other if our visions are very different from each other? Is there still a kind of collective action that is possible? A collective creation of power, perhaps, that supports all the diverse wishes and visions?

That leads to the question of what acts of manifestation will look like if engaged in collectively. Is that just the sum of individual acts as described in most New Thought materials? Or is there a qualitative change involved? Is it just a matter of agreeing on a time for simultaneous meditation, or is there a joint process of identifying wishes? Are there ways of filling vision with power that are only accessible collectively?

The challenge for using New Thought approaches for political agency seems to me to lie in asserting the individual power of definition, cherishing and strengthening it, but then also integrating it into a vision of collective agency. It seems important to acknowledge that thought structures are not only rooted in the individual, but are also a shared, communal, collective structure, that can be created, preserved and changed collectively.

So I am suggesting that introducing the possibility of collective agency to New Thought approaches would be a first important step to take. Another would be to shift attention from the well-being of one to the well-being of many or all.

From individual well-being to the well-being of all

Another rather obvious but equally important point to be made with respect to New Thought is that I am of course interested not just in my own well-being as a narrowly defined individual, but in the well-being of all humans, or perhaps, of all life.

New Thought texts sometimes seem to focus strongly on individual well-being; however, since the

reader or practitioner is always called upon to fill in own aims and wishes, one might say that only a small change is required to adapt this part. Instead of wishing for my personal health, for example, I could wish for the health of several people, or of the whole planet.

Some new questions do arise with that change, however, and they are analogous to questions of legitimacy of representation and of speaking for others that are raised in various other groups and political contexts, too. If I wish for the happiness of others, is it also me who defines for them what happiness is, what it is they need or should want? The question is not just whether my power extends to that realm, but also whether I have the ability and the legitimacy to say what would be good for others.

However, that may again depend on the concepts of individuality and interconnectedness I am using. Only a very strong individualist stance would arrive at a position where "I" am entirely separate from "others". Other approaches will at least allow me to see myself as a part of a larger whole, where wishing for the well-being of the whole is still also a form of wishing for my own well-being, but includes a broader perspective and more components.

I will not try to resolve these questions here. I merely wish to point out that shifting focus from a narrowly individualistic to a broader or more encompassing collective level in terms of whose well-being is being considered may raise a couple of other issues worth considering.

The nature of happiness; the desired good.

I have already mentioned that the reader or practitioner of New Thought approaches is meant to fill in the personal aims and wishes meant to manifest in the reality of his or her life. In that sense, it does not necessarily pose a problem if a large number of New Thought texts focus on the achievement of material wealth and personal health. It is perhaps understandable if irritation arises when the examples chosen to illustrate the methods include an incredibly high percentage of big cars, big houses, and big bank accounts. However, if I do not believe that happiness lies in a big car or money in general, I am free to formulate other, perhaps wiser, wishes.

1.3.4. From success within a framework to changing the framework

New Thought texts tend to focus on the possibilities of the individual in a given situation, e.g. how to get rich within the society and economic system that currently exist. Rarely do they aim at changes in collective structures, in the framework that we live our lives in. Indeed, the very existence of such collective structures framing, shaping, enabling and limiting our individual lives is not often explicitly mentioned.

I would like to illustrate this with the sequence in the movie "The Secret" already mentioned in the previous section. The sequence actually included in the movie shows a gay man improving his individual situation in the office through an individual act of self-appreciation, positive thinking and the resulting behaviour and radiance. I have already suggested an additional sequence to the movie illustrating that such acts of self-appreciation can also be engaged in collectively.

Another sequence might be added, for instance on changes in the legal system: how paragraphs discriminating homosexuals have been or are about to be removed; how legislation supporting queer families has been enacted. Such a sequence would have had the important effect of acknowledging the fact that these laws do indeed exist. It would also have conveyed the message that laws do matter, that they can be changed, and that there are things we can do to change them.

While giving attention to inner structures, it can be made clear that outer structures also exist, also matter, and also can be changed. Even if one assumes that they invariably follow from inner changes, it is still important that they do indeed follow; that we do mention them explicitly, keep them in mind, observe and address them.

1.3.5. Just one law?

Another potential problem I see with New Thought approaches is reducing the complexity of the world to "just one law". Paying attention to our inner states is, to my mind, a very good idea, and indeed a considerable lever for affecting change in our lives and societies. However, that does in no way mean it is the only one. It seems to me that we are well-advised to let go of our desire to find "one law", "one key" to understanding it all.

It seems to me that this desire may stem from a somewhat unrealistic expectation I have of myself, or others, for instance politicians. If I put myself under the pressure of having to have understood the world, I will be prone to reductionist explanations. For my only chance of understanding everything is that there is one law only, or two perhaps, that bring forth all the manifold forms that we observe in the world. Personally, I am trying to remove myself from the expectation that I can and should understand the whole world. That will also lessen my desire to find one law that explains it all. It will help me to see the simultaneous importance of inner attitude, and of ownership of means of production, and of gender relations, and a number of other factors.

1.3.6. Metaphysics

Many New Thought texts give a more or less elaborate metaphysical explanation as to how and why the proposed methods will work. Personally, I find that these explanations usually do not appeal to me. It is probably not for me to say if they are wrong (for what do I know about the nature of the universe?). However, I do not find them necessary. I believe that if many of the actions and approaches suggested by New Thought are found to be helpful, it can be explained on purely psychological and social grounds, and I personally prefer that type of explanation. The mechanisms suggested can be understood and explained along a number of different lines, and it may be best if all chose the ones they prefer.

1.3.7. What if our problems were mostly born of illusion?

What happens if we try to tell us a story that includes as general assumptions the following:

- human beings are beautiful
- everything is easy
- the world is about to be saved
- there is nothing I need to contribute expect what I like doing best anyway
- the change we desire is agreeable to all
- there is enough space for everyone and we'll simply do our bits where they fit
- currently, we humans are busy standing on our own toes, and all we need to do is to stop doing that.

Just imagine a large portion of the world's problems would turn out to be like that: a figment of our own imagination, the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding. As soon as we realize it was a misunderstanding, the problems disappear. However, if we believe the illusion to be real, if we begin to fight, then the problem manifests and really does exist.

Let me stress again that what I am trying to say here is not: "that's how it really is" but: "what happens if we start telling ourselves that?". What implications would such a story have for my feelings, for the paths of action I perceive, for the level and kind of energy with which I apply myself to those paths?

- 1 Bushe (1999), p.2
- 2 Bushe (1999), p.3
- 3 Watzlawick/Kreuzer (1988), p.52
- 4 Watzlawick/Kreuzer (1988), p.60
- 5 Cooperrider (2000)
- 6 A very inspiring novel, even for today, I find. Although I do not favour a centrally planned system the way Bellamy describes, I was struck by the relevance some of his descriptions of the present still have. What I also find worth copying is his idea that the transition to the bright future was peaceful and very easy, to the point where people, looking back, really wonder how anyone could ever have thought there were insurmountable problems.
- 7 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_sequels_to_Looking_Backward
- 8 www.fictionalley.com
- 9 e.g. Das Schwarze Auge(www.dasschwarzeauge.de); Dungeons and Dragons (www.wizards.com/dnd)
- 10 list of live action roleplaying events in Germany: www.larpkalender.de; in Austria: www.arioch.at
- 11 Boal (1979)
- 12 "Lust am Verrat. Stellungswechsel in Feminismus, Performance und Film", 11-13 January 2008, brut im Künstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria.
www.brut-wien.at/start.php?navid=detail&id=43
- 13 e.g. www.naturaufstellungen.net
- 14 Macy/Brown (1998)
- 15 www.siebenlinden.de
- 16 www.findhorn.org
- 17 In particular, this compilation draws on Mohr (2001), Byrne (2007) and Wattles (1910)
- 18 It could be interesting to compare New Thought recommendations in that respect with research on methods employed in advertising, and the conclusions drawn from the way human attention, focus and memory seem to work.
- 19 Mohr (2002)