

“There is nothing more worth fighting for.”

Social Dreaming with Social Democrats in Austria

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This is a description of a Social Dreaming Matrix held with a group of Austrian Social Democrats in 1999, who were local council members in one of the federal states. The idea of holding the matrix came up at a workshop on Organizational Role Analysis (cf. Krantz & Maltz 1997; Lawrence 2006; Newton, Long & Sievers 2006; Sievers & Beumer 2006), that I had organized in Vienna. One of the participants approached me during the coffee break to ask whether I knew someone who could do a workshop with him and some of his colleagues on the presence of ‘the occult’ in social democratic factions of local councils in the federal state of Austria, where he lived.

Even though I was quite astonished, not to say nonplussed, about what might be meant by ‘the occult’, I got into a conversation with him. It soon became obvious that what he had in mind – even though he did not quite use that ‘terminology’ – was to address the unconscious aspects of the politics of the local council’s factions. He was concerned that it had proven again and again that even the best results of meetings and retreats remained only on paper and could not be put into action unless personal and structural ‘blocking mechanisms from the occult’ were taken into regard. When I told him about Social Dreaming, he soon took it as an appropriate and fascinating frame for our collaboration.

Some time later we arranged a four-day workshop with the title ‘The Other Side of the Organization’. He and seven of his colleagues took part. As its focus was the special situation of these local councils, I had a hunch that a mere attitude of ‘without memory and desire’ would not be sufficient to do justice to this special request and the kind of work we were up to. I therefore asked him for some literature and documents to help me to get a better understanding of the history of Social Democracy in Austria. Even though there would certainly be parallels to the situation and history in Germany, I wanted to be familiar with their specific context.

The social democratic workers’ movement appeared to have had a major impact on the social and political development of Austria. Social Democrats claim to be *the* important freedom movement in this country. “In the first phase of activities it [i.e. the social democratic workers’ movement] has fought to establish political democracy and the republic, in the second it has built up the welfare state, and the task for the third phase is to develop political democracy and the welfare state into more of a social democracy” (Sozialistische Partei Österreichs 1978, 3).

In comparing the 1998 party program (SPÖ-Bundesgeschäftsstelle 1998) with that of 1978 (Sozialistische Partei Österreichs 1978), I was surprised to learn that the party had not only changed its name from *Socialist Party of Austria* to *Social Democratic Party of Austria*, but it had also given up most of its original rhetoric and language – and – one could assume – part of its original mission. Whereas in 1978 it was stated: “we *socialists* are *fighting* for man’s freedom and dignity, ... against all suppression and exploitation through political despotism and private economic or state-capitalist power” (Sozialistische Partei Österreichs 1978, 1; my emphasis), the 1998 document emphasises that *social democrats* “are *obliged* to honor the ideal of a humane, democratic and just society. ... This ideal of a humane society is the aim whose

realization we gradually hope to accomplish by democratic competition with other political concepts” (SPÖ-Bundesgeschäftsstelle 1998, 3; my emphasis).

The transition from a party for the workers to one “for all working people” (ibid., 4) is consistent with the fact that even though for more than a century actually the *socialists* had been “the leading power of societal change in Austria” (Sozialistische Partei Österreichs 1978, 45) it now – in 1998 – are the *social democrats* who are taking credit for having achieved the great progress of previous years. By 1998 what had been called ‘capitalism’ in 1978 had been updated to ‘inconsiderate neo-liberalism and unsocial neo-conservatism’.

From the documents I received in advance, it was obvious that the local councils played a significant official role in the Austrian governmental system. Based on a tradition of more than a century, municipalities and local councils are democratically elected institutions with a high degree of autonomy. In addition to their governmental and administrative tasks, they provide the majority of services required for the daily life and safety of citizens living in municipalities, for example kindergartens and schools, water supply and waste disposal, police and fire brigade. With the exception of a few towns and cities, almost half of these municipalities have no more than 2,500 inhabitants (cf. Neuhofer n. d.; Brünner 2003). Though one might assume that the policies of the local councils would reflect those of the national parties, that is actually not the case. In fact it seems that national political principals were less influential at the local level and in rural communes, in particular, than on the level of the federal states and the republic. I thus imagined that the members of the local factions that I would be working with might feel a certain estrangement from their comrades in the state and republic parliaments. Evidence elicited during the workshop supported this presumption.

The relevance of this issue for our upcoming work with dreams became truly clear when – during the first night of our workshop – I had the following dream: *In a conversation with a colleague I am becoming aware that she/he is*

an illegitimate child of Adolf Hitler. When I expressed my astonishment – because it was not known that Hitler had either illegitimate children or intensive relationships with women – the colleague showed me a list of names of women with whom Hitler had intimate relations, which had been published in a book. Apparently I had arrived as a German in Austria. Even though I had decided not to share this dream in the next Matrix – not least because it is the role of the host to a Social Dreaming Matrix to provide sufficient space for the dreams of the participants – it soon became obvious in the further course of the workshop that my dream reflected a theme present in the participants’ dreams. Subsequent to the workshop – when I was writing an earlier version of this paper (Sievers 2001) – I learned from ‘Der Spiegel’ that five “of the six women to whom Hitler had felt close during his life” had either tried or succeeded to commit suicide (Meyer & Wiegrefe 2000, 141).

Even though the participants were somehow hesitant and skeptical about working with their dreams and associations during the very first Matrix – an experience which is not uncommon for a first session – they soon became fascinated with the insights they were able to glean from their dreams on ignored and neglected parts of their own political reality. In the second dream shared in the first Matrix, *one participant had been at a political event, which included a winning ceremony of a lottery. The first prize had been an inflatable car.* The associations related to this dream were largely concerned with the question of whether the results of their political work and election campaigns were ultimately only hot air in a gigantic balloon. Unlike actual lotteries in Austria, the first prize was not even a real car.

The SPÖ’s (Social Democratic Party of Austria) low chances of winning an upcoming election had certainly created an air of disappointment and resignation in these participants. The wretched plight of social democracy came up again and again in the dreams and associations during the workshop.

In the next participant dream, *the leader of this group is quite certain that he does not have to remember his dream because there will be minutes. Only when he wakes up does he realize that no minutes had been taken. Associating to his own dream, he wonders if, due to the common practice of taking minutes of meetings, the dream of socialism has been lost.*

“We stay permanently onstage but have forgotten the text” is the association of another participant. *“Would it not be much more appropriate to stick a needle to the balloon (the first-prize car) or pull out the stopper to let the air out?”* Party events (such as those in the current election campaign) are experienced as overblown and mere cabaret. One of the participants questioned what they represent on the stage. *“Scene shifters, lighting technicians – we are no leading lights, we don’t play a role”* was the response.

One of the next dreams is referred to by the dreamer as the ‘Storm and Stress Dream (Sturm und Drang Traum)’. It consists of episodes from the 1968 student revolt. *“That was a situation in which one was playing a role. The masses of slaves (i.e. students) were competing with the professors. We staged disruptions at the Burgtheater and the Opera (in Vienna). We arranged happenings and gave speeches with lots of joy and lust.”*

The second dream shared by the same participant takes place in the institute where he is employed. *The director has introduced a procedure by which all events are to be evaluated. He presents and vehemently defends this quality control procedure, for which he is made responsible, at a board meeting – despite the fact that he himself cannot identify with it. “My heart is not in this work, but it has to be done. It is not my dearest wish to accomplish this task”.* Another participant comments that there is not too much difference between the dream and reality.

In one of the following dreams there is a reference to a house named ‘Chapel’, which is owned by the SPÖ. It is associated with Charlie Chaplin’s film ‘Der große Diktator’ – ‘The Great Dictator’ – in which Hitler stands on a

box to appear taller than he actually is, while Mussolini sits on a couch. *“Today we do not live a full life.” “The generation of our fathers participated in the war with enthusiasm. That was tragic, but they have been betrayed. Who is betraying us today – or are we betraying ourselves?”*

To what extent these questions about the future of social democracy are both subliminal and, at the same time, paralysing for the everyday life of these participants and connected to the party’s current identity crisis becomes evident in the following associations during the first Matrix: *“If what we have accomplished with social democracy at present actually is a dream, then we have to fight against this dream. That is a gigantic story.” “... When we or the generation before us still had a vision that was worth fighting for Today it is only a matter of winning elections!”*

The Matrix on the following morning began with a dream in which *one of the participants attends an event with the SPÖ chairman and president of the federal state in which the workshop took place. Amongst other issues, the political leader spoke about a strategy for the world’s future. He had made a very bad impression and ended up enraged.* To everyone’s surprise, the dreamer – who had had no previous knowledge of such an event – had just read in that morning’s newspaper (after he had had his dream) that this had really happened the previous night. The fact that he, somehow in synchronicity with the newspaper editors, had dreamed a situation that actually had happened without him knowing about it, left the rest of us in a state of stupefaction and wonder. It also made us realize what aspects of everyday reality the work with dreams could reach if one is prepared to allow for it.

The associations raised by this dream again referred to the discrepancy between the party’s public ‘persona’ and the actual reality and reinforced the contrast between the previous revolutionary commitment and the current shallowness, falseness, routine, and betrayal. *“The situation is almost like in Kafka; one has instructions that ultimately remain unfulfilled”.*

As before, the generation of fathers comes up in the associations. *“While our fathers’ generation wanted to change the world – in the war, our goal was just to defeat our fathers in the 60s and 70s. As a matter of fact we should fight against our corrupt party, a system that exists. I have lost the dream, the vision of what social democracy embodies. There is nothing more worth fighting for. What is important has already been accomplished; we don’t have to fight for it.”*

The fact that the meeting of the European social democratic party leaders (Blair, Klima, Schröder etc.) took place in Vienna the very weekend of the workshop contributed to the disillusionment concerning the present situation and found its expression in the dreams. The newspapers referred to the meeting in Vienna as a family reunion. This was reflected in associations to how the social democratic body of thoughts could be transferred into the next generation. *“What do we have to offer our children? Despite the ongoing and increasing globalisation we have abandoned the internationalisation of socialism in our party program!”*

This particular association apparently refers to the fact that the phrases “international solidarity of all people as the strongest weapon in the fight against suppression and injustice” and “the pledge to the principals of the socialist international” were omitted from the 1998 edition of the party program.

After bread and wine had been distributed among party members or potential voters in two other dreams, the question was raised: *“What has happened to all the good wine of socialism. Has it turned to water? Is the reason that nobody wants it any more the fact that it has turned sour and does not taste good any more?”*

The ideological shift in the way the party sees itself – as expressed in the two party programs – reflects the fact that most of the original socialistic dream had been realized in the last decades and there was not much left worth fighting for. As “social democratically co-determined policy had not only helped increase the level of welfare but also overcome traditional fetters of thinking and

action” (SPÖ-Bundesgeschäftsstelle 1998, 4), faith in this dream and its revolutionary creative potential may have faded. Election campaigns have degenerated into a competition between political parties, who compromise for the mere sake of gaining a majority.

Although a sense of betrayal seems to be inherent in several of the dreams and associations – the illegitimate children of Hitler, the inflatable car, the scene shifters and lighting technicians, the new evaluation procedure, the good wine of socialism, the brain surgery – I wonder what it means that the actual experience of betrayal could not explicitly be addressed in either the Matrix or the Mutual Consultation Groups. In trying to understand this, another, much earlier experience of a Social Dreaming Matrix in Germany comes to mind. In a Matrix in which we were working both in English and German neither the participants nor we as hosts were able to relate to the word ‘*Buche*’ (beech tree) and its meaning. We were working in a Protestant house named after Martin Niemöller. In the garden in front of our working room was a sculpture of him symbolizing the seven years he spent in the concentration camps *Sachsenhausen* and *Dachau*. The word *Buche* apparently was too close to *Buchenwald* (beech forest), another concentration camp, in order to be associated to (cf. Lawrence 1998, 24f.).

As expressed in one of the associations to the ‘Chapel’ dream, the memory of the fathers who had been betrayed in the Second World War led to the question of whether the members of the Matrix were either being betrayed by the social democratic party or were, in fact, betraying themselves. The betrayal was related to the fantasy that the accomplishments of the social democratic party had made the dream a reality. That led to the thought that, if so, this ‘dream’ had to be fought against and destroyed in order to revitalize the original one. If such a betrayal was part of the political reality, they were not only the victims but were also playing an active role – quite similar to the protagonist in the dream about the new quality control procedure “*despite the fact that he cannot identify himself with it*”. In retrospect, I think the politically propagated

belief that the old dream had been fulfilled was not only an illusion but a lie that ‘desecrated’ the original dream of socialism. Recognizing this would have created an unbearable despair in the group. To acknowledge this despair and ultimately to uncover the betrayal would have required a ‘revolutionary potential’ other than the one expressed in the dream of the student revolt in the late 60s.

Whereas resignation and a feeling of hopelessness dominated the dreams and association during the first days, the dreams of the last Matrix showed unimaginable and unexpected possibilities for the future of social democracy. Perhaps the effort required to achieve these possibilities would actually be worth it. As demonstrated by the following dream in particular, this was not primarily a matter of strategies or programs but related to the symbolic nature of transformations and metaphors for how change could take place.

Images of telephones and cell phones had already appeared in previous dreams shared in the Matrix. One dreamer introduced his dream in the following way: *“In a dream many unrealistic things come up which appear in the dream as normal and logical. On occasions like this I like to continue dreaming and am really fond about it.”* And he continued: *“Someone has sent me a case by fax that contains a small box. In the box was a meal of meat and goulash sauce. As the meal was not accessible through the fax, I could not eat it. Then an amazing technical solution occurred to me. I converted the fax into e-mail. Suddenly the meal was edible. It tasted good. The happy ending is due to the transformation, which came to my mind. I am quite proud of myself”.*

In the Dialogues during this workshop I shared some thoughts on the organizational shadow (Bowles 1991) and on the ‘psychotic organization’ (Lawrence & Armstrong 1998; Sievers 1999). These ideas resonated in the following dream fragment and the associations towards the end of the workshop:

“My wife and I were in a place where we stayed over night. The house was much too big for us; we were five people. At breakfast we were four at the table.

My cell phone rang. A/our boy was calling me from the second floor and told me that I should come up; he wanted to show me something. He had a device similar to a cell phone, a transmitter. One had just to press a button in order to talk with someone – without a cell phone.

The conversation refers to an acquaintance of mine whom I had not seen for years. She is a heavy drinker; she is drinking far too much. She had to undergo surgery; one of her kidneys had to be removed – a surgery which usually is not that severe. But instead her brain was cut open. One could see that half of the head was empty. She cannot remember the other half. The brain is supposed to be ..., can be perceived as a highly developed control centre, which processes a lot of information. But here it was half empty, the electrical impulses were somehow organized.”

The associations to this dream concerned the potential meaning of the other half of the brain. *“Does the amputation of the brain or one part of the brain not stand for the way we are accustomed to cope with psychosis, with the psychotic parts? By questioning the method of Social Dreaming, are we not repeating the way in which we previously dealt with mental disease and psychosis? Psychotics have been treated in earlier times quite brutally. Electroshock was used to get rid of it. Mental disease was treated with surgery.”* *”It fundamentally is a matter of capacity. Normally we make use of our brain and consciousness in a limited way, 50% of the capacity is just cut off.”* *“The psychotic system, the psychotic organization is a sick system, a self defence mechanism through which the brain slowly is dried up and decomposed (as in the example of the alcoholic friend previously referred to).”* *“This dream mirrors the instrumentalist way we deal with reality. We are living in too large a house in which it is required to use the phone. Is it progress to own a cell phone? This is total alienation caused by technical means.”* *“It is because scientific feasibility legitimises so much. What is feasible has to be made. A holistic understanding of the life and the soul of man thus is getting lost. If it is true that we normally are only using 50% of our*

thinking functions, then the other 95 % (sic!) may perhaps have another function. In our organizations we tend to delete, to forget, to cut off all this.”
“The cell phone and radio stand for ‘reading thoughts’. Through the dreams I can thoughtfully relate to others and have an exchange with them.”

I can only recount a limited number of dreams and associations in comparison to the number that were actually shared during this workshop. Even so, it seems that this sketch has sufficiently demonstrated the hypothesis underlying Social Dreaming, i.e. that in our dreams we not only deal with problems of our working life but – if dreams are made public, associated to and linked in the Matrix – further meanings are elicited which have been broadly ignored in everyday life.

As the workshop approached its ending, the participants were equally relieved and surprised to have discovered many neglected parts of reality on which their activities and politics in particular were based. There was the view that the effort at understanding them may lead to further development of their political work in the faction of local councils. Apparently they came more in contact with the ‘unthought known’ (Bollas 1987). Through “‘dreaming’ the environment” (Bion 1994, 46) the unthought known could, to some extent, be grasped and put into words and related to the thought known and the rational thinking in the party and its political environment. It is most likely that through this workshop the party members’ understanding of reality took on a new light and new meanings – meanings that include those tragic parts that must be acknowledged in order to learn anew to hope against all reason. Thus they confirm Bain’s (1994, 2) observation: “One of the potentials of Social Dreaming is the opportunity to create a new meaning for being a member of an organisation.”

The workshop participants were quite surprised at how easy it was to relate to one another through the dreams and to make links to their own everyday work, without actually talking to one other or engaging in their typical

discussions. Forced to acknowledge that their faith in the ‘dream’ of socialism had been shattered, they became connected to a different sort of ‘faith in dream’ unknown to them before.

At the end of the workshop one participant expressed how much was still to be done: *“It requires much strength to allow the origin and roots of socialism to match the reality of the present time, in order not to get lost oneself.”*

3.898 words

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