

6 Some words as tools to think with

I BEGAN MY enquiry with questions about why activists so often treat each other, as well as our opponents, in ways that are incompatible with the values we are arguing for. I had questions about why we burn out, and why we think we have to save the world ourselves, and why we are as caught up in our status-quests as any self-respecting hedge fund manager. I was finding some possible explanations, as the last two chapters have explored. But the questions were not going away. Why did we *continue* doing these things? Why was it so hard to switch course? I was hardly the first campaigner to realise that we were often engaged in self-defeating behaviours. Gary Lachman, a prolific chronicler of 20th-century counter-cultures, was keen to warn me that every generation realises its version of these problems, but integrating that realisation remains hard. Every generation has people who start to see that political change requires us to attend to our inner lives, while others want to stay focused on the politics and the economics. → why the other or?

Why is it so hard, then, for activists to see what we are doing when we are caught up in righteousness, sacrifice, individual shouldering of the burden, saviourhood and status-chasing? As we have already seen, some of it is about the workings of our own shadow, our splitting-off of what we don't want to see in ourselves. And some of it involves culturally learned patterns, too. The effect of our culture upon us is like the water that fish swim in and cannot see. It is hard to see how our context shapes our perception. It is hard, then, to see how deeply the problems run – including through us and our activism.

If we could start to perceive how deeply the problems run, we might start to see the extent of what needs to change. But it is hard to talk about, because we don't really have the words. Language can constrain the extent of what we can imagine, and English is short on well-understood and popular words that adequately describe how, simultaneously, we are a product of the world and yet we produce the world. That we live in 'a world partly constituted by human consciousness', to use the psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist's description, is simultaneously a straightforward observation and a complex one.¹⁵⁰ It is true in a simple constitutive sense: together we constitute the world, and so if the world changes we change, and if we change the world changes. But it is also true in deeper ways, which recognise not only how we make the

this metaphor elsewhere.

world through our actions but also how the world creates us at – almost – the very core of our being. Our development varies from its shared and evolved pathway according to the influences and environments that we encounter. And the way that we perceive everything and everyone who is not us profoundly affects all that we do. Yet we persist in thinking, as our culture instructs us, that we are separate from everything that is not us.

If we are going to talk about the ways that activists are entangled in what we are trying to change, then we need a suitable language for this overarching shared context of thought and perception that needs to change, if the changes are to be lasting. There are a few candidates, which I have borrowed from philosophy and sociology. Activists sometimes talk about the ‘paradigm’ that we want to change. We tend to do this when we are trying to think big, beyond the laws and policies that can be simplest to get changed; towards culture shifts, perception shifts. The term was coined in 1962 by the physicist and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn. For Kuhn, a ‘paradigm shift’ is what happens when a scientific framework of understanding starts to buckle and break down under the impact of new research and then, suddenly, shifts – like the move from Newtonian to quantum physics. While he was thinking specifically about the natural sciences, where uncontested paradigms can exist in a way that they cannot in the social sciences, the idea of a ‘paradigm’ quickly escaped into more general use, to mean a worldview or intellectual framework.

As the systems thinker Donella Meadows put it:

The shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions, constitute that society’s paradigm, or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works. These beliefs are unstated because it is unnecessary to state them – everyone already knows them. Money measures something real and has real meaning; therefore, people who are paid less are literally worth less. Growth is good. Nature is a stock of resources to be converted to human purposes.¹⁵¹

In campaigning terms, then, a paradigm shapes the terms of all of the ‘systems’ that activists want to change. For example, feminist campaigners might be trying to change the laws to recognise the ways that domestic violence works, with its insidious forms of undermining and control, as well

paradigm
Psychology
Psychiatry
Affect?

as direct physical aggression. The *system* that we really want to change, though, is patriarchy, the control of society by men, together with the sexism that props it up and the violent misogyny that polices it.¹⁵² But behind the system of patriarchy is a *paradigm* of thought, feeling and relating, based on assumptions of superiority and dominance, that makes sexist assumptions and misogynist violence even possible. Meadows' point is that paradigms get changed when we can step outside of the 'system' and see it whole, see how it sits in its paradigm. The term 'paradigm', then, is a useful indicator of the scale on which activists need to operate. It's not a bad word, and I do find myself using it. But it is not quite rich enough. It only hints at what is going on. It does not help us to understand how the unthought-about ideas, assumptions and practices that constitute a paradigm become part of our inner worlds, or, conversely, how we generate them.

There are two other words that do seem to say a bit more about how we are held in the world while generating it: the 'lifeworld' and the 'imaginary'. The 'lifeworld' is an idea that takes account of our inner lives and the way they can be connected to the inner lives of others. It was suggested in the early 20th century by Edmund Husserl, a philosopher who studied our experience of consciousness (a field called phenomenology) and was built upon, later in the century, by the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. The latter saw the lifeworld as the shared background understandings to the lived experience of people, communities and the social sphere. 'This stock of knowledge supplies members with unproblematic, common, background convictions that are assumed to be guaranteed,' Habermas wrote.¹⁵³ It is shared, a form of collective consciousness that we take for granted. Any social grouping has its lifeworld of shared meanings and understandings. Activists, for example, will have a lifeworld that is mutually intelligible – of values, priorities, lifestyles and understandings that underpin their ways of thinking, interacting and communicating with each other. Groups that differ in their outlooks, however, will share a wider-scale lifeworld that allows their different 'languages' to be, more or less, translatable. So activists will share, with everyone else, the lifeworld of the society of which we are part: the assumptions, social norms and ways of thinking that come with shared language and culture.

e.g. that comment about alternatives
 ↳
 do org. + assumption that politicians =

Murchak → socialism as values
v. socialism
as
state -

For Habermas, the 'lifeworld' is in contrast to the 'system': the commercial imperatives of the economic market and the administrative bureaucracies of the state, with their instrumental rationality that treats individuals as means to their own end.¹⁵⁴ In traditional and premodern societies, lifeworld and system were tightly interwoven. But as societies become more structured, with stratified division of labour, increasingly complex states and legal processes, and economic activity separated from the family and home, lifeworld and system become more differentiated. The personal and interpersonal are removed from the public realm, in which the market and the state now set the terms. (As illustration of the concept, the extreme state that Orwell speculated in his fiction is one where everything has become system and there is no lifeworld left.)¹⁵⁵ It was precisely this separation of the personal and social from the politics, science and bureaucracy that allowed the 'system' to become so complex in modernity. But the irony, Habermas argued, is that while this complexity could not have happened without the shrinking of the lifeworld, the complex bureaucracies and markets that result then start to intrude upon – to 'colonise' – the lifeworld.¹⁵⁶

What does this look like in reality? It's what market-driven society does to people's ways of relating to each other in communities and as citizens, by monetising transactions that were previously done through mutual support, or by changing the relations between extended family members when the working-age adults have to spend more time at work. The system starts to predate more and more upon the lifeworld. Habermas saw the 'new social movements' – the activist uprisings of the sixties and seventies for civil rights, women's rights, peace and the environment, which were 'new' because they no longer followed the lines of class and labour agitation for redistribution – as emerging forms of resistance against various colonisations of the lifeworld.¹⁵⁷ Activist movements take place along the 'seams' between lifeworld and system. When I talked my way into that OECD meeting to confront those bankers, lawyers and government employees about a set of laws that I wanted enforced, as I described in the previous chapter, I was facing up to a 'system' of finance as well as legislative and regulatory power. I was doing so in defence of a 'lifeworld'

e.g.
care
work -

that was under threat in countries whose people were being exposed to the destabilising forces of footloose global capital.

Habermas's rich concept has set the agenda for at least a generation of sociologists, and is useful when thinking about what goes on in activism. It suggests a way of understanding what activists are trying to do: to restore a lifeworld that we sense has been profoundly deformed. It also suggests what may be happening when activists speak and are not understood, as we saw in Chapter 4. We are speaking, from our own lifeworld, with its assumptions and values, to a 'system' which speaks a language that works in different terms. But is it a way to describe all of what we are shaped by? On its own it is insufficient for the task, because, by definition, it does not encompass the 'system'. And as we have been seeing, activists are as shaped by the intrusions of the 'system' as much as anyone else. When the system demands, for example, that we see ourselves only as individual consumers, and leads us to do so through its structuring of government, public services and education, then this is a powerful influence on how we do activism that we need to be able to take account of.

This brings us to the concept of the 'imaginary', which is another term I am borrowing from sociology and philosophy. At first glance it appears to have some things in common with the 'lifeworld'. It is a way of describing the shared background assumptions to what we think and do. But by being a bit less specific, it can hold a bit more. For the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, the social imaginary is the 'common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy'.¹⁵⁸ It's the unconsciously held – or at least, rarely thought about – set of ideas that govern how we relate to each other, and what we think is normal or ought to be. 'Imaginary' seems a tricky word when we meet this idea for the first time. We are used to hearing it as an adjective rather than a noun, an adjective that means 'not real' and that is used pejoratively to suggest we have made something up that is in contrast to what is real and true. Encountering the word as a noun that names a phenomenon, it is hard, at first, to get past this feeling that we are being asked to think about something that is 'not real'. The 'imagine' in 'imaginary', though, is being used in the generative meaning of the word: it is what we generate with our imaginations. This is what makes it very useful for thinking about activism.

↳ "Burns" as a concept & its impact on the
 "imaginary" → does it contract or expand
 what can we imagine about work/life - life

Activists are living in the shared imaginary of our culture – and, as we have been seeing, are ourselves affected by it – while simultaneously perceiving that it could be different and that changing it could be worth the effort.

‘All of us make the imaginary, it is how we imagine things to be,’ says Sam Earle, who is studying the philosophy and practical application of thinking in terms of imaginaries. We are all, constantly, creating the imaginary we live in, and it shapes us. ‘The imaginary is intimately connected to the imagination,’ she says. It holds ‘the capacity to reproduce existing tropes that help to cement collective identity, and, conversely, the capacity to conceive of radically new ways of being in, and relating to, the world.’ For Earle, the imaginary of each society has a unique constellation of ideas that are either reinforced, or shifted, by our actions – by ‘words, gestures, behaviours, politics, institutions’ as well as by our thoughts. ‘Our actions are the backbone of the social imaginary: they are our imagination made visible,’ she says.¹⁵⁹

So the imaginary is a capacious description of what activists are trying to change, as well as what we are enmeshed in. It is a way of describing the world and our place in it that takes account of what activism is trying to do. Taylor’s description of ‘common practices’ and ‘legitimacy’ is precisely the stuff that activism concerns itself with when it is trying to alter norms and laws. If activism is a work of imagination which can see that something could be different – and all activism must start with such seeing – then the imaginary starts to shift as soon as some people start to see differently and to act differently in response to their new sight. The idea of the imaginary contains a recognition, then, that activism can begin with an act of imagination. It also, however, contains an implicit recognition that this ‘seeing’ can fail. We can fail to see the terms of the dominant imaginary we are living in. We can fail to see how its terms hide from us the nature of our relationship with the world. We can keep on trying to change a ‘system’ without seeing the assumptions that lie behind it. The dominant imaginary frames our thinking and our acting, while hiding, in plain sight, the fact that it is doing so.

What both of these ideas – the lifeworld and the imaginary – help to illuminate is that everyone, activists included, has been created by the forces that activists are trying to unpick. The activist’s job is complicated because

we are trying to change a system we are implicated in. In the next three chapters I'm going to look at some of the ways this is happening, by examining some of the contents of the dominant imaginary that activists find ourselves caught in. But if imaginaries contain 'words, gestures, behaviour, politics, institutions' as Earle suggests, then where on earth do we start? That sounds like everything under the sun. It contains ideas as well as matters made concrete, stories as well as structures. It might seem, at first glance, that stories affect our inner worlds, while structures and systems – in the forms of institutions of power – affect our material life. But as Taylor points out, the very nature of the imaginary means that it's no good trying to separate what is 'inner' to us and what is material in the world: we would be creating a 'false dichotomy between ideas and material factors as rival causal agencies'. It is hard to separate ideas and human practices, he warns: 'one cannot distinguish the two in order to ask the question, Which causes which?'¹⁶⁰ The ideas and the systems we create, he is saying, are themselves entangled. And of course, there is no description that can set out the complexity of human experience in a linear way.

Still, that ideas and human practices are entangled is precisely what activists are dealing with. My intention for the next three chapters, then, is a temporary untangling, so we can get a glimpse, a feel for what activists are caught in. I am going to start with stories, then move on to the institutions of power – the systems – that are created by the stories, and that shape people, activists included. I'd then like to bring the circle round, and back to how these *stories* and *systems* affect our inner lives – which of course then plays out in our behaviour. The concept of the 'psychosocial' – a word to describe psychological processes interacting with social contextual forces to shape behaviour – contains a recognition that psychic and social processes are always implicated in each other and cannot be understood separately in a meaningful way.¹⁶¹ To even separate 'what is arriving' in our inner world from 'what is already there' can only be a narrative trick, as we have been shaped by our environment since before we were born.

So activists are entangled in stories; entangled in power; entangled in the ways that stories and power shape our inner worlds and our experiences of being an embodied human. Once we start to think about it in this way, the very idea that we can change the world without even acknowledging this

misses culture -
↑
cultural organisation

complexity comes to seem rather extraordinary. Whichever of these aspects of our entanglement we look at, there is much to observe about how far we are from being able to change the world if we perceive it as something 'over there', separate to us.