

- and again in 2024.
↳ 2026 local council election.

7 Entangled in stories

FOR ANY activists who had not realised the strategic importance of stories by 2016, the votes for Trump and Brexit made it impossible to ignore. These were votes for the stories that their campaigns were telling, not for the facts about what the practical impacts might be. Alex Evans, a campaigner who had spent his career as a development expert working for NGOs and writing policy reports for UN committees, woke up to the limitations of such activity and wrote a book called *The Myth Gap*, exhorting progressive activists to wield emotionally activating stories as effectively as conservatives do. Andrew Simms, who has authored several books on climate change and the need for a new approach to economics, began, alongside his campaigning, editing books of 'modern folk tales for troubled times' that would invite readers to 'engage a different brain'. (I took the opportunity to turn 'Bluebeard' into an offshore tax lawyer in the second collection.)¹⁶² There has been a proliferation of projects, trainings, consultancies and exhortations encouraging activists to think about storytelling and to find stories that will engage the hearts and minds of those we are trying to influence. 'Narrative' and 'storytelling' have become campaigning buzzwords and are useful for attracting the attention of potential funders. This emphasis operates at a superficial, tactical level: what is the story we can tell about this issue we are working on that will reach the people we want to influence? It is happening at a strategic level, too, on issues where campaigners have recognised that the policies they want to change are based on an underlying story that needs shifting, and 'changing the narrative' becomes the aim and not just the method of their intervention. → saw this unmodified clay "bowl" - story of the org as "activist".

Whether storytelling is adopted as a tactic or the crowning of a 'new story' is the goal, we assume as activists that we are in a position to manipulate the stories we use. We assume we can send them out into the world at our command. It has a whiff of paternalism as well as exceptionalism. Those people out there are being influenced by stories; we, the activists, need to tell some new stories; and we have got sufficient perspective on the stories that already exist to create some new stories that will work for our purposes. But is that true? It's a succumbing to a particular story, as the fantasy author Terry Pratchett observed: 'people think that stories are shaped by people. In

fact it's the other way around.'¹⁶³ Or, perhaps, it is both. Ben Okri describes what novelists perhaps understand more instinctively than most campaigners: 'One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.'¹⁶⁴ But in order truly to change narratives and stories, activists need a sufficiently deep understanding of the stories that are already in place – and that we might be embedded in ourselves. Martin Shaw, a mythologist, storyteller and wilderness guide, complains about the story-illiteracy of the young 'eco set' with their 'premature intelligence and even strident wisdoms. Your insights, though brilliant,' he warns, 'cannot yet carry the chthonic weight of images that have trawled countless thousands of years to lay their treasure at your door.'¹⁶⁵ His point is that we have plenty of stories already; the problem is that we don't know them or don't understand what they are telling us.

Stories don't just underpin the institutions and rules that activists say we want to change. They hold the invisible aspects of the imaginary that frame what we think is normal. Narratives become normative. They tell us what should be common sense. They form the unseen structure of tangible institutions that wield tangible power. Stories with ancient roots in the religious cultural bedrock, with their injunctions about sacrifice and hard work and proving worth, later came to the fore in the Protestant Reformation and were built into the structures of capitalism, outliving the widespread abandonment of formal religious observance.¹⁶⁶ Stories that were made up about the existence of race as a scientific category, told to justify the exploitation of colonialism and the trade in people who had been enslaved, have outlived the previous manifestations of those practices. Stories with their roots in the earliest agricultural societies about human freedom from the web of life, gained through technological mastery, have gained strength over millennia through incorporation in religions, social structures such as patriarchy, and more recently mainstream economics, which still do not recognise ecological limits, even as we face ecological collapse. Activists may develop a critical stance on some aspects of the story and want to do something about it: that is why we became activists. But

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other aspects hold us firmly. Progressive activists might have separated themselves from the moral prescriptions regulating personal life and behaviour that came with old religious stories, but we are still caught up in ideas about the work ethic, proving our worth and having to be good. Stories about freedom from the web of life can lead activists to advocate for technocratic or technological changes to 'save' nature, but from within a frame that still fails to challenge the faulty positioning of 'nature' as only an input to 'economy', and as separate to 'human'.¹⁶⁷

A thread running through many of these stories, and one responsible for ensnaring many activists, is individualism, an ancient story with its roots in the Axial Age in which the monotheistic religions emerged. As the author and broadcaster Mark Vernon points out, you needed some sense of yourself as an individual to be able to comprehend the great monotheistic 'I am'.¹⁶⁸ At the dawn of the modern era the individual became the locus of resistance to previous manifestations of power. Protestantism overthrew the rules about who had access to God, and liberalism overthrew the rules of deference to monarchical absolutism. Some new heroes emerged from these revolutionary new stories. One was the individual, whose freedom and – so the theory went – equality are protected by prioritising the individual over the collective. Another was the rational actor, 'homo economicus', of classical and neoclassical economics, who – so the theory went – will weigh economic opportunity and behave logically to maximise his benefit.

The capitalism that current activists often want to modify (or, depending on the activist, overthrow) has, they argue, taken individualism down a destructive path by elevating the rights of individuals as consumers and the rights of some individuals to profit at the expense of others. Neoliberalism – which, to use the political economist William Davies' description, has been the state-led attempt to remake society more firmly in the image of the market over the past generation – has added fuel to the stories of liberalism. It has done so by further emphasising the role of the competitive individual and, as the state increasingly legislated itself out of the job, by de-emphasising the role of the collective. Yet the human rights that activists defend and want to extend are also founded on the primacy of the individual that is at the heart of the Eurocentric liberal imaginary. These are rights that each person holds, as an individual. In individualism, too, is

c.f. Esoterica?
(Josh's
Feelge).

→ thinking as well about diagnosis
→ individualisation of modern individuality.

rooted the very possibility of the activist as a thinking self who can express the views held by that self. When we think that we have to save the world ourselves, as Chapter 5 described, we are acting out the individualist script even if our campaigning is condemning the effects of individualism.

So we are deeply entangled in *particular stories* that underpin the problems we are trying to change. We think we are changing them, and perhaps we are changing some aspects, but we remain held by others. We are also entangled, however, in *our habitual ways of relating to stories*: in how we respond and react to them. To be more precise, we are entangled in our habitual ways of relating to particular types of story, the ones that can be called ideology. What does it mean to say we are entangled in how we relate to ideology?

When activists criticise the stories that have been most absorbed into mainstream common sense (which is how the imaginary is often disguised), we are often accused of being ‘ideological’. When do stories become ideology? An ideology is a set of political ideas, so one answer to that question is when, taken together, stories about what humans are like and what we need are used to create a political or economic theory. An ideology is a set of ideas with a practical intention; ideas that somebody wants to put into practice, rather than ideas that are going to help us transparently see reality.¹⁶⁹ The other answer to that question of ‘when do stories become ideology?’ however, is ‘when we don’t like them’. It can be an accusation of *wrong thinking*. The way that the other side’s thinking is ‘ideological’, while ‘our’ thinking, naturally, is rational and logical. Ideology has a way of disguising itself as common sense when applied to the doctrines that we do agree with, or – for those who like the status quo – when they support the status quo. People who support ‘neoliberal’ policies without describing them with that word, for example, can feel uncomfortable when confronted with the suggestion that neoliberalism is not just ‘common sense’ but a deliberate doctrine that was developed, researched and implanted in university economics departments over decades before it emerged into policy under Thatcher and Reagan.¹⁷⁰ Marxists would call this unawareness ‘false consciousness’, a failure to acknowledge the reality of dominant economic and class interests.

But ideology as an accusation is also an accusation of *not enough* thinking; and that is where many people's allergies to it – and, by extension, to activists – come from. The history of the 20th century reminds us that ideology can be the road to concentration camps and gulags. Some people's horror at the mere prospect of progressive activism arises because its ideas sound, to their ear, too much like socialism, and that sounds like a very obvious version of 20th-century ideology gone wrong. As Hannah Arendt observed, ideology was central to the operations of totalitarianism. But in her view, this wasn't because the ideologies that underpinned Nazism and Stalinism – racism and communism, respectively – were themselves inherently totalitarian. It was because ideologies of any kind contain elements that make them, as she put it, 'disturbingly useful for totalitarian rule'.¹⁷¹ These elements include ideologies' claim to total explanation, their promotion of thinking that can proceed without any reference to reality or experience, and the vulnerability of such thinking to being extended into an endless logic with deadly consequences (such as that those people deemed inferior must be killed). These tendencies, she argued, all operate in direct opposition to free thinking.¹⁷²

For the political theorist George Kateb, what ideology has in common with all other kinds of stories – personal, historical, fictional, myths, legends, religion, theology – is that it is an attempt to confer meaning and structure on the raw material of reality.¹⁷³ Stories satisfy our longing for clarity, structure and meaning. Any teller of any kind of story is leaving out some of the details of life as it is lived, moment to moment, in order to create a compelling narrative. The problem, then, is any kind of story or idea that is taken literally. In this view, the ideology-fuelled totalitarianism that Arendt anatomised was the ultimate attempt to impose structure on reality, by controlling the everyday reality of everyone. Our fear, when we fear fanaticism, is, in Kateb's words, of the 'story that the ideology tells about reality'.

But it can also be the mere prospect of activism that is troubling to observers. The mere prospect of people who are sufficiently convinced by a story to be acting on it can feel, to those who do not feel the same, like over-conviction. For someone who is not doing activism, anybody acting on stories and ideas holds the potential to appear a bit suspect, rather like the

way that anyone who holds more anger about politics than we do ourselves can seem a bit incomprehensible.

Activists of all kinds are telling stories all the time: about what is wrong with the world, about what will make it better, about how to get there. Someone's reactivity to activists who are telling 'stories' – or ideology – about reality is grounded in a fear that those stories and ideologies will become weaponised against certain people, certain beneficiaries of the status quo ... perhaps against themselves. Such opposition to ideologies can even become ideological in itself; and I am saying 'ideological', there, in the pejorative sense of 'something that is done without thinking'. Somebody 'just knows', for example, that they distrust conservatives. Or, that they distrust activists. Or that they distrust anyone who talks about 'white men' or 'privilege'. They observe what looks like lack of thinking in activist ideology. They do not always observe the possibility of their own defensiveness about the problems that the activists are trying to talk about, a defensiveness that may be rooted in the stories that they like to tell about the world, or about themselves as good people.

The thing is, activists *are* often ideological. We *are* often working according to a set of ideas about human needs and how to meet them with particular political and economic actions. We are acting towards the adoption of one set of ideologies, while trying to unwrap the tentacles of the old ones from around our ankles – and perhaps failing to see quite how many tentacles there are. And we are, too, often busy promoting our chosen ideology without being aware of what we have invested in it.

I encountered this idea that we might relate differently to ideology as *a way of thinking* in the work of developmental psychologists like Robert Kegan, Jane Loevinger, Bill Torbert and Susanne Cook-Greuter, who study how we develop throughout our lifespan. The lens through which they see 'adult development' varies: values, worldviews, cognitive capacities.¹⁷⁴ Whatever the focus of the model, they are describing the same thing: that humans develop in stages, potentially throughout our whole lives, and that we remain at each stage for some time, before a transformation to the next. These stages of development happen to individuals, and also to the evolutionary history of culture. As the theorist of consciousness Ken Wilber puts it, 'each of these stages of development occurred to humanity as a

I dislike the tendency in evo-psych to "hierarchy of culture"

whole, and repeats itself in essentially basic ways in individuals today, with everybody starting at stage one and proceeding essentially up to the average level of development in his or her culture (with some individuals lower, some higher).¹⁷⁵ I found these theories interesting because they describe the process by which people can both change their ideology, and their relationship with ideology. While the models are not focused specifically on activists, their findings are applicable to what happens when people become activists, as well as to what happens when we change our perspective on activism. They helped me to think about the ways in which activists are entangled in stories.

As a brief diversion before I continue with unpicking our entanglement in stories and ideology, I should add that the developmental models also helped me to think about some of the questions that were troubling me as I emerged from the form of activism that I had been doing. Reading Ken Wilber and Frederic Laloux, who frame the developmental stages in terms of 'values' and 'evolution of consciousness,' helped to explain my sense of bafflement that people with whom I otherwise had plenty in common, including my own family, could hold such different values to mine. In the terms of the Spiral Dynamics model, which both these authors build on, and which are fairly straightforward to grasp with their colour labels, I had perhaps made the classic becoming-activist transition from 'Orange' to 'Green', and was now disdainful of my family's largely Orange values. Orange, in societal terms, is modernity: rational, materialist, scientific, entrepreneurial, expertise, achievement, meritocracy. It fuelled the scientific and industrial revolutions, brought liberation from monarchical and religious authority and outlawed slavery, and it is still the beating heart of leaders in business and government. Green, which emerges from Orange, is pluralism, equality, fairness, cooperation. It was appearing in artists and radical campaigners in the 19th and 20th centuries and emerged into full flowering in the 1960s, driving the new social movements for civil rights, feminism and the environment, and then the NGO scene that they birthed towards the end of the century. It has been at the centre, too, of postmodern culture in academia. Green is troubled by the shadow side of Orange: exploitation, corporate greed and its focus on profit above relationships and ecology.¹⁷⁶

→ how are they applicable & why though?

I was excited to read about this. Here, it seemed, was the invisible architecture of my arguments with my Dad. His centre of gravity was Orange, and mine was now Green. Here, too, was some context for my despair that the senior people in the companies I was targeting as a campaigner could seemingly care so little about what lay beyond the profit motive. It felt reassuring. My turning against some of Dad's values wasn't only my rebellion against his personal authority and identity; it was a cultural move, too, something that happened more widely. But Green also has its shadow side, and it manifests in the phenomena that had been troubling me about activism. In its reactivity to Orange, Green becomes the only outlook that is right. It leads to the paradox that the people espousing tolerance for all are themselves profoundly intolerant of those who disagree; as indeed I was of my Dad's views. Wilber named this shadow side the 'mean Green meme'.

I had, and still have, qualms about these models. One is that they seem insufficiently political. To people who are deeply involved in campaigning for social justice and ecological sanity, they seem to skate over the extent of the oppression, environmental damage and corporate excess created by the Orange cultural value stage, and to see oppression primarily as something that came with the earlier 'Red' and 'Amber' stages. In describing the stages that emerge after Green and that seem to remedy Green's activist intolerance of wrong thinking, they seem to skate over the extent of the work that still needs doing, the work that the people who are operating from the Green mindset are at least trying to do. My second qualm about these models is that they emerge from the dominant imaginary and, insofar as I have seen, contain insufficient reflection on the extent to which the dominant culture has shaped their view. They can sound at times like the worst kind of old anthropology, with its talk of 'primitive' cultures. Capacities and mindsets which we only develop, according to these models, in advanced stages of development, such as interdependence, are central to non-European worldviews that place interdependence of humans, both among humans and between humans and non-human nature, at the core of their philosophy and way of life.

My third concern is that they are prone to misuse. The models propose a 'developmental hierarchy' in which higher stages are not 'better' than lower

Wish it that the paradox of tolerance? → although, not feel like a thought feminizing cliché.

Or just to acknowledge.

ones; they are merely a description of how things are. But to readers who are inevitably shaped by the kinds of 'dominator hierarchy' that we see and experience all around us, in which anyone 'higher' on most scales is not only seen as 'better' but is able to wield more power, it is extremely hard to resist the temptation to rank ourselves and everyone we know. It is also tempting, when ranking ourselves, to situate ourselves further 'up' any of these models than we actually are. If 'spiritual bypass' is pretending to a high level of spiritual enlightenment without having done the consistent work and practice to truly attain it, then 'developmental bypass' is, in my view, what these models can encourage in intelligent people who have the cognitive processing and abstracting capacities to appreciate intellectually what the higher stages consist of, but who have not fully absorbed the lessons of each stage along the way in order to encompass and then transcend them. And I am including myself in this observation; I have been as tempted to try to rank myself as anyone else who has studied these models.

That the developmental models are misused, however, does not mean they are without value. Let's return to ideology and storytelling, and specifically to Robert Kegan's model, which focuses on what happens in individuals rather than what happens in the culture at large. In his view, we grow in maturity when we can take as 'object' those phenomena to which we were formerly 'subject'.¹⁷⁷ What does this mean? The developmentalists' insight builds on Jean Piaget's pioneering observations of children's development from infancy to adulthood. Piaget was interested in how children construct the mental models that they use to understand the world. A two-year-old is his needs and desires; he wants that toy now and he cannot conceive of a self that is separate from its desire for the toy. The only thing that will work, if the toy cannot be in his grasp, is distraction. His eight-year-old sister is able to do something different. She also wants the toy, but she can comprehend that her desire for it is not the same as 'her'. She is someone who *wants* the toy. Her desires have become 'object' to her. She 'has' her desires, rather than them 'having' her. It is well recognised that transitions to a more complex developmental stage occur throughout childhood and adolescence, but less recognised that they continue, with the right conditions, throughout adulthood.¹⁷⁸

A key adult transition, although not one that all adults make, is from the stage Kegan calls 'socialised' (which most adults do reach) to the one he calls 'self-authoring'. We go from defining our perspective and values according to the norms of the people and society around us (socialised), to being able to form and hold our own values and perspectives (self-authoring). This shift can mirror what in other models looks like the transition from the values of Orange to Green, although there is no direct or easy translation between the cultural value models and Kegan's model. (And there are arguably plenty of activists with an Orange centre of gravity, or a mindset that is socialised within their activist community.)

In Kegan's view, minority groups find both challenge and support for the transition to 'self-authoring' when they work to develop their identities in order to fight for them. 'Any "community of ideology", whether it is a culturally embedded community, and thus less visible (such as the induction of those favoured by the culture into the professions), or a community of counter-dominant ideology and thus necessarily visible (such as induction into feminism or Afrocentrism), can serve as a support or a holding environment for evolving [the self-authoring stage],' he writes. 'They call on their members to construct a theory of their own oppression and an internalised system or procedure for subjecting all their values and loyalties to reanalysis.'¹⁷⁹ This is the consciousness-raising and development of agency that activists who are fighting for their lives know very well, and it results in a person who has consciously chosen their stance towards the world.

The shift to self-authoring can also be the classic move performed by someone reacting against the dominant culture in which they have been raised to become an activist. They start, as I did, to criticise the values that were previously invisible to them, and to adopt a different stance. They now 'have' the dominant ideology – let's say, because this is a common occurrence, 'neoliberalism'. It is no longer invisible, nor common sense: they can see its effects in the world around them, and they can critique it. And they have adopted and identified with, as the foundation of their self-authoring identity, a new and different ideology. It might be 'socialism'. It might be 'deep ecology'. Or it might be 'climate emergency'. The activist has dropped one story and is now in another. For people turning to activism

via either of these routes, the ideology of the dominant culture is now 'object' to them. But ideology *in itself, as a way of thinking*, is still invisible. They are still in its grip: thinking ideologically.

Kegan suggests that we can develop further, to a point where we 'have' ideology as a way of thinking, and can see its effect on us. This happens at the stage beyond 'self-authoring', which he calls 'self-transforming'.¹⁸⁰ That there is even a possibility of relating differently to ideology raised questions for me, and I struggled with this idea when I first came across it. I became immediately defensive. Is it even a problem that activists *are* thinking ideologically? Surely that is the motor of activism? And what would happen to activism if we were less held by ideology? When I read Kegan's suggestion that there is a mindset in which we can develop beyond ideology's hold on us, it sounded like he is valorising a detachment from ideology by associating it with greater maturity. To my activist ear, that sounded dangerously close to valorising a detachment from commitment, since the ideology – or story – which guides us can seem inextricable from the vision to which we are committed. To my activist ear, it sounded like an implication that we can 'grow' out of activism, and that, in turn, can sound uncomfortably like our parents telling us that we will become more conservative when we get older.

I have slowly started to hear something else in what he is saying, though. It's that we may still be ideological – committed to a particular story and the alternative picture of the world that it paints – but we can also take a perspective on *how* we are being ideological. In abstract terms, we can 'have', or take as 'object' to us, *the very idea of being ideological*, rather than remaining 'subject' to it by ... well, by thinking that our ideology *is* us. What does this look like in practical terms? We may still be committed to working for the story of our chosen ideology, but we are no longer attached to it *as a way of thinking about who we are*. We understand that our ideology is not us; it's a frame for thinking and seeing and acting in the world that we have chosen to adopt. Its boundaries are not necessarily our boundaries. This means we are more likely to be able to hear what people with other ideologies are saying, even if we disagree, without instantly being activated to defend what we had hitherto thought of as *our* boundaries. We are more likely to be able to stand up for the issue calmly.

→ my activist mind wants to call this tone policing.

To be clear, Kegan is not talking explicitly about activism in his description of the 'self-authoring' mind. I am applying his thinking to my own questions about activism. In Kegan's terms, then, when we 'wake up' to being an activist and use this waking up to develop from the 'socialised' stage to 'self-authored', we are disembedding ourselves from some of the commonly held stories of our culture and adopting new ones that give us a sense of agency and identity. We are a boundaried self, we know who we are because we have chosen who to be, and activism is a key part of our identity. It is more than that: our identity as activist-for-our-chosen-ideology is what has helped us to attain that powerful sense of self. So we get attached to our new and chosen ideology because it feels part of us. It feels part of our identity as a self-authoring adult that we are fighting for our ideology's vision of the world. What this strong sense of self-direction and identity obscures from us is how attached we have become to this view of ourselves, and how attached we might have therefore become to the story that has helped us to develop this boundaried sense of ourselves.

And what I have gradually started to see is that it is possible to retain the depth and strength of commitment to an alternative vision that we need in order to fight for that vision, while not identifying *ourselves* so completely with it. I started to see it in long conversations with activists who are intuiting and experiencing that it is possible to be very committed to the work without being quite so attached to the importance of your own place in it. When they speak from this awareness, they are finding they sound different. Their activism sounds different. They come across differently. To my ear, tuned to Kegan's observations, what these activists are describing is possible because they are relating to ideology – to the *story* of what they are trying to shift in the world – differently. They are identifying with it differently, and the crucial difference is that they can see *that the story is not them*. They are reaching this intuition through different routes. But whether we are fighting for our own identity, or our chosen identity as activist as part of our own evolution – or, indeed, both – this is a hard-won, difficult and utterly counter-cultural insight. The insight is counter-cultural because it seems to go against the culture of so much activism: the 'hero-ness' of it, the sense of me being at the centre of it all, whoever I am and whatever I am fighting for, sword and shield raised against the world. That is why it was

hard for me to hear: because I am still disentangling myself from the understanding of activism I had created, with myself at the centre of the story, driving the action. If the vision I'm working for helps me to feel like me, then it can feel hard to hold that vision more lightly. It can be hard to see that it is not all about me. It can be hard to hold myself back from going in for the kill whenever somebody disagrees with me.

So it is hard to gain this stance on our entanglement in ideology. It is hard because, as a developmental move, it cannot simply be done through a willed shift of perspective. Any developmental transition, as Kegan reminds us, requires support as well as challenge and, of course, time. Gaining perspective on our entanglement in ideology is also hard for another reason, however, one that these models, in their lack of focus on politics, pay less attention to. It is hard because the dominant ideologies, the ones that activists are seeking to extract ourselves from and then overturn, have taken concrete form in the world. The dominant ideologies have been made tangible in the institutions of power that shape our lives. To 'see' ideologies from the outside is hard when, applied in practice by those in power, ideologies can alter our embodied experience of the world. They can alter our epistemologies, our ways of understanding what we encounter. Ideologies combined with systems of power develop heft in the world, which is what I turn to in the next chapter.