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## Power, Powerlessness and Chances of Productive Action 10 Theses

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An African proverb says:  
*Many ordinary people,  
in many small places,  
who do many little steps,  
can change the face of the  
world.*

These lines remind us of our own strength and the chances of gradual change. They address the readiness of ordinary individuals to overcome their feeling of powerlessness. Citizens are not only objects, but also subjects of personal and social power: in their social relations they are carriers of power, they establish and legitimize power, whether actors or spectators. Power and powerlessness are based in interaction and systemic structures on three levels: the micro level of individuals, families, friends and other face-to-face relations; the middle or meso level of larger groups and organizations; finally the macro level of the national political, economic and social system and of international relations. Here I will deal with the micro level of the acting subjects: how they relate to power and powerlessness in their personal and social relations, according to needs of love, self-realization and social belonging, based on interests, norms and values, how they may change the world inside and around in everyday life. Or, more generally speaking, I will look at the subjective side of power relations aiming at a practical psychology that shows chances of productive action following Erich Fromm's humanistic intentions.

To achieve this goal we need a realistic

analysis of the formal and informal mechanisms of power or rule, and how they are exercised at all levels of politics, economy and society. I try to avoid illusions as well as a view that unduly psychologizes the reality of power relations and the chances for change. This applies both to capitalist democracies in the West and to post-authoritarian systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Here, an array of chances for the democratization of politics and society unfolded after 1990. There are substantial achievements, particularly in countries that joined the EU in 2004. But, as in nearly all post-authoritarian systems after World War II, we also observe the at least partial persistence of power structures, elites, patterns of thinking and behaviour dominant in the period of bureaucratic socialism. The overwhelming power of the elites finds its counterpart in widespread feelings of powerlessness with the citizens. We feel the long-term impact of traditions in the mentalities and the political cultures of nations that only change very slowly. Education seems still to be widely based on subordination, not aiming at autonomy and the ability to think and act independently. A vast majority of citizens lacks the experience, the resources, the motivation and the belief that they can change something in society *by their own efforts*, creating a vigorous civil society. This is not only a result of the authoritarian socialist past, but also of today's living conditions: most citizens have to invest nearly all their energy in the battle to survive, in keeping or achieving a modest, or what they regard as an now ade-



quate, standard of living. Last not least, we should not start from the assumption that we can totally "dissolve" or „abolish" all feelings of powerlessness, neither in personal nor in social and political life.

Yet, I have to somewhat neglect systemic contexts and objective conditions, differing from one country to another, when I now try to answer two central questions of a more general character: What makes us powerless? What makes us strong?

### The Individual and the Others: Max Weber's Definition of Power and the Subjective Dimension of Power Relations

According to Max Weber, „in a social relationship, power is the chance to impose one's will on others even against resistance, no matter what this chance is based upon" (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tuebingen 1972: 28, 542) Here power is understood as a chance or as a *potential* which only exists in relation to others. And, Weber conceives power as *control* of others: *my will* can be imposed, even against the other's will, leaving open what this power is based upon.

For analytical purposes, power can be first looked at as an individual potential, as power, strength or potency within me, without any relation to others. But power and powerlessness develop and appear only in relation to other people, in certain social contexts, roles and systems. So power should be understood as a process and a product of personal and non-personal relations. It is not a substance, a personal characteristic or a lasting property. Its bases and modes of exercise may change, varying with different socio-cultural systems and historical conditions. We also have to distinguish between latent or virtual power (resources, means, potentials not used) and actual or manifest power as used and to be observed in social interaction. The quality and stability of power relations primarily does not only depend on the objective resources, but rather on how they are perceived and actually used: To whom do we ascribe how much power? Who will, who does use his power in which way? Do we think it is possible to resist,

and do we actually oppose to it? Or are we powerless?

Power and powerlessness are both complementary and interdependent. They form two poles on a continuum of the strongly differing potentials of individuals, groups and institutions. Power includes that others have less or no resources of power and/or they cannot or do not want to use it. Power may be exercised so that the freedom of the other is preserved, that he is not forced to change his beliefs, goals or behaviour. He may do so voluntarily and based on insight, without being threatened or in visible conflict: power then is effective as *influence*. On the other hand, as an extreme, power resources may be used to *force* the other to comply, or even to manipulate others without knowing and against their proper interests. People may then get mostly unconsciously under the control of others, at least partly based on non-transparent and structurally reinforced power relations (influence vs. domination).

Power and powerlessness can develop into solid patterns of relationship, deposited and handed down by generations in norms and structures. Yet, power and powerlessness basically are (re-)produced in a permanent process of exchange, resulting into an imbalance of power, which, in principle, can be transformed, passed or even reversed. Power can be lost or given up, powerlessness can be overcome and changed into strength. Conditions for such changes differ very much in the different spheres and levels of society. Power used in a democratic, humane way, based on respect and solidarity, aims at the autonomy of others, the *empowerment* of the many. However, it may not lead to an end of all illegitimate power. So, in an ethical perspective, power as a concept and resource is basically neutral, neither good nor bad: it is the ability or capacity to shape social relations, to achieve something, to create and to be effective. How much freedom and justice, how much repression or how many privileges go with it, can only be determined empirically and then judged upon.

Finally, power can be analyzed as *organized* social or political power. Then we study the basis, the distribution and reproduction of power, the relationship between consensus and



conflict *within* groups and organizations: claims for legitimacy, power hierarchies and elites, legal rules and sanctions, formal and informal mechanisms of rule, but also changes in power relations, their erosion, reforms and revolutions. Here we are interested, above all, in the chances and limits to overcome latent or manifest powerlessness by *productive* ways and means.

In his definition, Weber emphasizes the character of power as control *of* or even *against* others, if necessary based on force. True, the exercise of power in a democracy includes the chance to impose one's will if it is legal and morally acceptable, i.e. *legitimate*, maybe in conflict and, if necessary, by using the state's monopoly of legitimate force. Yet, in everyday life and in a humanistic perspective, it is more important how to gain strength or power *together with* others and as a potential to do something *for* others. If we mainly look at vertical structures of dominance and subordination or adaptation, we neglect the aspect of consensus and democratic bargaining. Democrats would strive for horizontal cooperation, and ask how we can overcome powerlessness by getting together, supporting each other and building some form of efficient, but non-bureaucratic organization, based on grass roots initiatives and horizontal networks.

Weber and many others before and after him once and again asked for the *objective bases of power* and various typologies have been developed. Without entering into a discussion on concepts and theories of power, it is nevertheless useful to remember the manifold sources of power which have to be mobilized if powerlessness should be overcome. A common typology in social psychology distinguishes the following sources of power: (1) reward, (2) punishment, (3) legitimacy or acknowledgement (e.g. based on socially accepted norms, values and procedures; on performance and success; physical or psychic qualities; social prestige, position and institutional competences) (4) identification (somebody wants to be similar or equal to a person or group); (5) real or ascribed knowledge and ability to present good arguments; (6) access to and disposal of information, means of communication and networks. If power is based on the sources (3) to (5), many

authors call it *authority*. (Cf. e.g. H.W. Crott, 1987: 231-238)

As pointed out, power does not only have an objective, but also an extremely important subjective dimension. Hence, a second point of criticism of Weber's definition is that he hardly looks at the psychological aspects of power and powerlessness, i.e. what kind of emotional and biographical experiences go with it, and how they influence attitudes and behaviour. Weber writes extensively on beliefs in the legitimacy of power, e.g. in his often quoted typology of forms of rule. But Weber looks at these beliefs only in a functional way, „from outside“, and mostly in relation to political rule, on the macro level of systems. In this context, he does not study *intrapersonal* processes, and rarely concrete forms of *social* interaction in everyday life on the micro and meso level.

What do we mean by this *subjective dimension*? It is our perception, our feelings, and how we learned to deal with power and weakness. Power is strongly built upon and reproduced in social relations

- by the way we think about it;
- how we feel, how we experience power(lessness), in the past as kids or young people, today as adults, as subordinates or „bosses“;
- how we „digested“ or used our experience in our psyche and biography;
- the attitudes we develop and which patterns of behaviour we practice during the process of lifelong socialization, e.g. whether we lean towards authority, whether we follow the pattern of „learned helplessness“, or whether, in the sense of psychoanalysis, we develop some good ego strength and act with autonomy.

Autonomy, self-organization and political participation, and a vigorous civil society, independent from both the state and the market, are necessary elements to safeguard freedom and to enhance a society's capacity to solve its problems. The way how we deal with power and powerlessness strongly determines the quality of individual life, of social and political relations, hence the chances for the development of a mature democratic political culture. This is espe-



cially important in the transformation of post-communist societies if they want to take the road to pluralist democracy.

Above all, I am interested in the subjective, psychological aspects of power and powerlessness, the chances to deal productively with related problems, and the dynamics of micro politics in modern democracies. Therefore, I will focus on two questions:

1. *What makes us powerless?*
2. *What makes us strong?*

Looking at power relations and how we experience them in everyday life, I would like to put forward ten provocative theses. The theses do not only describe and analyze power relations, but they also contain proposals and thus may prompt to think of alternative ways how to deal with power and powerlessness. As I address the acting subject, I will frequently use the personal pronouns „we”, „you” and „I” (without the intention to teach or preach something from outside). Thus I do not advocate a kind of radical subjectivism which would mean it only depends on the individual or an intrapersonal change of attitudes, cognitions and emotional setups in order to change social relations or even a political situation. But it is the individual person, the many individuals where we can and have to *start* with and *base* change upon – a necessary, but not a sufficient precondition for change at large. I want to follow a down-to-earth perspective on chances of productive action for everybody, for him-/herself and in the immediate social environment, leaving open whether and when somebody may also get organized politically.

### Ten Theses on the Inner Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness

*1. Within and beyond the limits of law and structures: in personal interaction, another person has only that much power as given to him by myself.*

We all are born into and live in power structures and institutions which we did not create ourselves, in which hierarchies, functions and

roles are set up that cannot be changed on short term notice. Yet, *within* the framework of given formal institutional settings, you may perceive and use your power in very different ways, whether at the top or more to the bottom of the hierarchy. *Beyond* legal norms and established structures, in a psychological perspective, we can observe this pattern of power transfer in personal interactions: If one person, if many persons have power over others, then there are always two sides – the one who *gives* the power and makes the other superior, and the other one who *takes* the power and makes others inferior to him. Consciously or not: we *create* asymmetric and interdependent power relations. We are all familiar with the dialectics of master and servant: What is the master without his servant? What is a boss without employees? What is a minister without his bureaucracy? A first step to overcome powerlessness is to see clearly what happens in this often unconscious process when we transfer power to others.

*2. Our evaluation strongly determines the status and the prestige of the powerful as well as the powerless and the relative impact of their power.*

It is our judgement and recognition, where we apply our standards as shaped by culture, history and society that make power appear to be morally good or politically legitimate. In this act of acknowledgement and acceptance, we *give* other people and groups, leaders and institutions their rank and prestige. In this process of social and political ascription, it often happens that we overestimate *them* and devalue *ourselves*. A second major step to overcome the feeling of inferiority and powerlessness is to change the way how we look at us and those in power by developing a stronger feeling and consciousness of our own value, of our own experiences and achievements, of our rights and our of own dignity, so to speak „upgrading” ourselves.

*3. In social relations, superior power which I suppose I have to bow to, in reality is often*



*based on the force of habit or on voluntary acceptance.*

We often speak, with some resignation, of the superior force of circumstances, of „long established” patterns or relationships, or in a more abstract way of „the system” with its inevitable, all-powerful pressures, which are just given and cannot be changed. Though full of restrictions for those concerned, many regard them – partly because they believe it for at least subjectively good reasons, but also partly rationalizing and ideologizing – as „reasonable” and „necessary”. They seem to be without alternative, and in this sense, they appear and work as legitimate power structures that create widespread powerlessness. Seen in a critical perspective, maybe we are too fast in following majorities, not so much by democratic conviction, but just „because it is the majority”, because it is easier. And arguments of outsiders, radicals or minorities are often rejected too quickly.

We have to ask critically, also with some self-criticism: Are there not many power relations in everyday life that get reproduced mostly because we accept them without critical reflection, because we don't ask *why* they are so, or why they are regarded as „normal”? We often make ourselves *believe* that we are without choice or influence. But in reality, it is not the constraints of *conditions*, but the constraints we impose on *ourselves*, that we have internalized, and may drive us into resignation. It is the force of habit, of the usual that makes us to put up with too much. Thus we reinforce und legitimize structures and power relations in which we feel powerless and discontented, and that we do not dare to change or even to leave. As a consequence, we may get distant or even aggressive against others, socially and politically alienated. Or, we do not become aware of our own suffering, we repress it, or accept things as they are by living just as we do – yet, somehow we do not feel free. So, the crucial question is: Do we *really want* to change existing power relations? And only then: Are we *able* to achieve this by our own strength?

#### 4. *Overcoming powerlessness starts in our*

*minds: we ourselves, by our way of thinking, we make us dependent and hinder us to become stronger.*

There is a lot of people who make themselves dependent by always looking for the recognition and benevolence of others, of the boss, the institution or the public. Instead of being free and independent from inside, and hence towards others, I subordinate myself and adapt unduly to the wishes, guidelines or judgements of others. Fear and dependency combine. Authority does not get questioned, rights and strategies of self-assertion are not known, room for action is not realized. Neither the hard nor the rubber walls of power, nor the smooth, paralyzing cushions of powerlessness are consciously felt or recognized as what they are and bring about.

If one wants to overcome this kind of conformism and dependency, it may be helpful, to remember these sentences, to test and practice them, and to transform them by gradual steps of success into firm beliefs:

- Above all, I want to please myself, not so much others. I want to agree and be identical with myself. I want to respect myself and I show no more respect to my boss as absolutely necessary. I stop striving for applause and attention, to be accepted („loved”) whatever the cost.
- I lay down limits and I defend myself.
- I take the courage to oppose, to stand up in front of others, and to utter criticism towards my boss. Maybe, you express something what many others had already in their minds, but did not dare to voice openly. I describe an injustice without final judgement, without attacking others or driving them into the defence.
- I have the strength and the courage to question the usual and habitual, to let go „the old” and to step out, to quit in order to become my own boss again.

*5. Very often we think too much in a negative and restrictive manner. We do not see enough the positive chances and opportunities for change.*



Most of us know at once why something cannot be done or is impossible, why it is at least very difficult and full of risk. Very often, these judgments are based on good and rational grounds, resulting from a realistic assessment of limits and possibilities of action in a given context. There are some cases in which it is wise for a person who is inferior not to enter into a conflict with an uncertain outcome. But there are other cases, where the true reason for this decision is not „I don't want to take the risk“, but „I am not willing to“, „I want to avoid any trouble“. This „constructed“ powerlessness is then „functional“ for me, an excuse, an alibi. The reason may be that you were told as a child „you always better keep quiet“, or you were made believe „you can't achieve anything“. Then this person would no longer believe in his sense of efficacy, and/or that he will be heard and taken serious. Thus the feeling of powerlessness results from an internalized „*learned helplessness*“, a *loss of a sense of external control*.

Consequently, we find ourselves in situations in which we underrate our own potentials and abilities: we think in terms of doubts and reservations, pessimism prevails without confidence in our own strength being confronted by challenges (and suffering from what is). We do not dare a conflict, because we lack the know-how or do not see chances for productive settlement. We feel weak, intimidated, captivated, depressed, we get tired and melancholy – all this paralyzes us more than necessary. For sometimes we have more strength, more room for action, more influence than we *think* if we would just realize our capabilities. We could back more on our creativity, we can develop some imagination. There may be alternatives that we just have to look for, maybe already tested.

#### 6. Every change starts inside of us.

In personal relations, in partnerships or marriages, it is crucial for any change that I start to change *myself*. This is necessary as the first step. *Then* the other may change; at least, chances are much better that he/she will do so, or may feel

psychologically „forced“ to do so, because the old patterns do no longer work. This widely applies also to one's immediate social environment, e.g. the family, friends, colleagues, a group or a division in a business or administration.

I do not underestimate the difficulties to change our ways of thinking, feeling and acting. This requires first that we learn *to become aware* of what we *really* think and feel, what it is precisely that disturbs us, and what we *really* want to change. Often we first have to *learn* to become fully conscious of our needs and interests, to take them serious, and to formulate them precisely. I have to become moved in order to move something or somebody: rage and anger, emptiness and suffering can serve, if turned productively, as a motive and motor of change. But also, where my limits have been violated by others, or when I have come to the bounds of possibility, when I have reached „the deepest point“, when „I can't bear it any more“, the process of change may start, where I start to come back to myself to (re-)gain self-consciousness, self-confidence and strength.

What is meant here, is strength not as power over or against others, but as *potency* (as Erich Fromm already stated), a new inner balance that makes self-realization as well as social and political change possible. For this purpose, certain *personal and social resources* are necessary or at least helpful. I have to know and care for them to be able to activate or mobilize them:

- health, energy, ability to work and readiness to achieve
- money, time, mobility, flexibility
- knowledge, education, professional qualifications and experience
- the ability to articulate myself, to argue and to deal with conflicts
- an office, a formal position with competences, a good status in hierarchies, informal roles, networks, contacts
- prestige and respect, privately and in public, large or small
- getting aware of and overcoming fear and dependence
- motivation for change: readiness to have a realistic look at myself, to question images



and self-concepts, to deal with personal difficulties, to know your personal potential, altogether „ego strength”

- looking for and openness for alternatives, to develop perspectives for the future
- the conscious perception of feelings in a given situation and relationship, and, last not least, the will to get out of the valley of powerlessness.

Any major sustainable change of some aspect of our personality or in basic patterns of personal relations needs intellect *and* emotion, our mind *and* our heart, or, if you want to go deeper: spirit and soul. It needs serious efforts to do so, maybe also some help from outside, or entering some kind of therapy. Changes may, and often will not, happen without conflicts, crises, and possibly separation. One has to be able to bear frustration and tolerate ambiguity. And at certain points on this way, we may feel weak or powerless, too, futility despite all efforts. But wailing or to keep moaning is no solution either. Yet to go on may lead to changes that positively affect the whole person, our posture, our bearing, what we express in our face, our language, our whole appearance in private or public – we will radiate something new, lively, and shining.

### *7. Every change starts in my own sphere of responsibility.*

The best, and often only, point to *start* with change is my immediate social environment, where I am responsible and where I have some influence. This is a first insight, particularly if I take a realistic look and ask myself: What is feasible, here and today? Many underestimate the importance and the qualitative impact of gradual and often inconspicuous changes in everyday life, at the basis of society. But where else do I have some immediate control or influence to change the quality of social relations and the use of power?

At the place where we stand and where we are responsible for others, especially for people who are regarded as „below” of us, we may contribute to a social climate that fosters initia-

tive, autonomy and criticism. We can do so by delegating responsibility, allowing co-determination and being open to changes. In a *political* perspective, the individual, the family, face-to-face groups, the colleagues at the workplace, a citizen’s initiative are important *starting* points for changes in an organization, an institution or on the local level. If you want to influence regional and national politics, if you want to change structures on the meso and macro level of society you and your group have, of course, to aim at larger publics and higher echelons of decision-making.

Every single person can do *something*, but in public affairs we can exert influence usually only together with others, we have to get well organized. Effective political participation requires first that we are motivated and qualified for it, as well as structures and opportunities that make it possible. For those we may have to care, maybe to fight first. We then have to know rules and procedures, power structures and spheres where we can hope to exert some influence, finally alternative solutions for problems and adequate strategies of collective action. Success depends very much on a realistic view of what can be achieved under given circumstances, not only in half-democratic or authoritarian (sub-)systems, but also in the more „open”, liberal capitalist democracies.

In social life and particularly in politics, we experience the power of *public images* that are produced and proliferated in the process of political socialization and, above all, by the mass media. More and more, public conduct and politics follow the demands of self-marketing and are put into scene by professionals („spin doctors”). Politics itself becomes a stage-managed affair dominated by TV – a tendency to be observed in a growing number of countries. We will only be able to act with autonomy, if we become aware of how and in whose interest these images are produced, of their impact on our perception of power and weakness in personal and public life. We cannot overcome what makes us feel powerless, if we do not critically reflect the concepts, social norms and allegedly „naturally given normalities” of politics. Therefore, it is ever more important to educate also the average citizen, and make him



capable to critically deal with the mass media, and what they convey. This could be a way not to be „caught” by one-sided, ideological definitions of problems, by the manipulative presentation of leaders, parties, and information that make us feel weaker, less intelligent and competent to judge than we actually are.

*8. We often underestimate the impact of active and innovative minorities, the power of solidarity and courage at the grass roots level of society.*

Positive, *democratic* changes are often initiated by small groups who are strongly convinced of their progressive ideas, not dogmatic and try to win majorities by democratic means. In this endeavour only those gain lasting credibility as a person or a group who, pursuing their goals and on their way to power, already practice the values they propagate. In the West, civil and human rights groups, peace, environmental and women’s movements have shown how public thinking and restrictive conditions can be changed with solidarity, imagination and courage, with new flexible forms of organization and communication. They showed how powerlessness can be overcome not just for the moment, but in a sustainable form. In many Central and East European countries, under the former systems of bureaucratic socialism, originally small groups of dissidents and active, but prosecuted minorities turned into civic movements, and their peaceful revolutions proved how *powerless* the *powerful* and how powerful the *powerless* can be. But not only in Central and Eastern Europe we make the experience: under more or less authoritarian conditions, it is particularly difficult to become aware of your own strength, to speak out or utter criticism in public, or to believe in the power of self-organized activities at the grass roots.

*9. Productive is an understanding and practice of power which does not strive for control of others, but that is built and used to work together for common interests and the well-being of as many as possible. This is a democratic way*

*to combine legitimate interests of our own with social and political solidarity.*

If we want to overcome social and political resignation, we first have to see clearly what makes us powerless and others superior. (This is often difficult enough, and if done so, a remarkable cognitive and psychological achievement.) Some then ask how they can deprive others of their power, and regard changes in power relations as a zero sum game. But it is more productive, if we ask how we can become stronger ourselves, how we can gain influence and support, individually and together with others. This may mean, but not necessarily so, that others (have to) give up privileges, a dominant position or illegitimate rule. Majority and minority powers should rather be regarded as positive forces in social relations, in competing for better solutions where a maximum number of people will gain something (win-win games).

But those who stand up for freedom and justice, who are opposing the ruling elites, and who want to gain more influence in public affairs, have to reckon with conflicts – and they need courage. „If the power stands on the side of injustice and justice stands on the side of the powerless, then civil courage is needed.” (Ulrich Beer) To overcome powerlessness it is not always heroic courage is needed, but just a little more confidence to stand up for oneself and others. In some situations this requires what the author has elsewhere defined and explained in detail as civil or social courage in everyday life. (cf. Meyer 2004) This applies in particular when somebody is in a situation of being inferior to others, e.g. as minority in a group or as a subordinate in a hierarchy, and when helping, solidarity or active intervention for humane, democratic goals and legitimate interests are connected with some risk and possible disadvantages. A large spectrum of strategies, seminar designs and trainings has been developed how individuals and groups can act with strength („empowerment”), but without violence. In Germany, it is offered by public and private organizations as part of civic education. (cf. Meyer/Dovermann/Frech/Gugel 2004)

Our goal then is not to dominate others, but to be able to achieve something reasonable



with and for others and ourselves. In impressive writings, Hannah Arendt has elaborated this positive concept of power. As to her, power is the ability, to shape life and society („vita activa“) by power – not „over“, but „for or to“. Not the individual, but the group is powerful. Her understanding of power extends mainly to the public social and political sphere. She is not so much interested in the question: „Who rules over whom?“ She rather focuses her work on a new conception of political action as legitimate rule that is no more depersonalized. (Cf. H. Arendt, 1970 and 1981.) In this sense, we can use power and authority in a productive way: transparent proceedings, delegating responsibility, fostering participation and criticism. To gain strength then includes: not to deny conflict and competition, but to respect the legitimate interests of others and to be ready to compromise. Those are strong who are able to admit their own shortcomings and show a good sense of humour. This also means that I do not render too much power and authority to others, rather limiting theirs; to understand power less as „rule over“, but rather as responsibility for myself and others. Whether all these are empty words and pipe-dreams, will become visible and can be only proven in a concrete situation, in how we actually relate to ourselves and others.

#### *10. Overcoming powerlessness needs knowledge, patience and confidence*

To many these thoughts and proposals may appear as pure idealism, based on a subjectivist and voluntaristic approach demonstrating naïve optimism from a Western background, in short: wishful or even bad utopian thinking. Yet, I would like to underline that I am quite well aware of the difficult, sometimes desperate living situation and the many limitations for most people, both in Western and Central and Eastern Europe, not to speak of Russia and most other former republics of the Soviet Union, if they reach out for changes as outlined above. All of them are confronted with serious social and economic problems, though on a different historical and structural background, and on different levels of general achievement and social

inequality. And looking with realism at the European past, and in particular with much self-criticism at Germany, I realize how long it took us, how many set-backs, crises and catastrophes we had to experience before the majority of Western societies, each under specific circumstances, developed relatively stable democratic systems and political cultures, where power relations can be questioned in public, and where socialization and structures have been changed in private, social and political life.

We would have achieved already a lot, if we succeed in clearly analyzing how asymmetric power relations and powerlessness are reproduced, both on a personal and a structural level, how we feel in a given situation, and then realistically assess and test our own potential, rooms of action and their limits. The stronger our living contexts are (or seem to be) determined by others, the higher and more distant the echelon of final decision-making, the more difficult it is to gain and exert influence and to get things changed from the grass roots level of society. In this case, and in many other situations in personal, social and political life, *it may just possible to bear, to endure powerlessness as part of the reality of life and the given structures of our society and beyond.*

Nevertheless I am convinced, also supported by looking at biographies of courageous people and the success of liberation movements: If we develop, individually and collectively, ideas, conceptions, solutions for what should and could be, if we recognize our own potential, the resources and the chances for autonomous, responsible action around us, if we think of alternatives and dare to try something new, then, in the sense of the African proverb, we can change the face of the world, or put more modestly, some part of our own life, in our sphere of responsibility. To achieve this, realism and patience, courage and wisdom are needed, or to conclude with some lines from a German poet of the baroque age: *„Lord, give me the courage to change what I can change, and to accept what I cannot change, and the wisdom to distinguish between the two.“*



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