Foundations, Principles and Inspirational Resources of **Integral Politics**
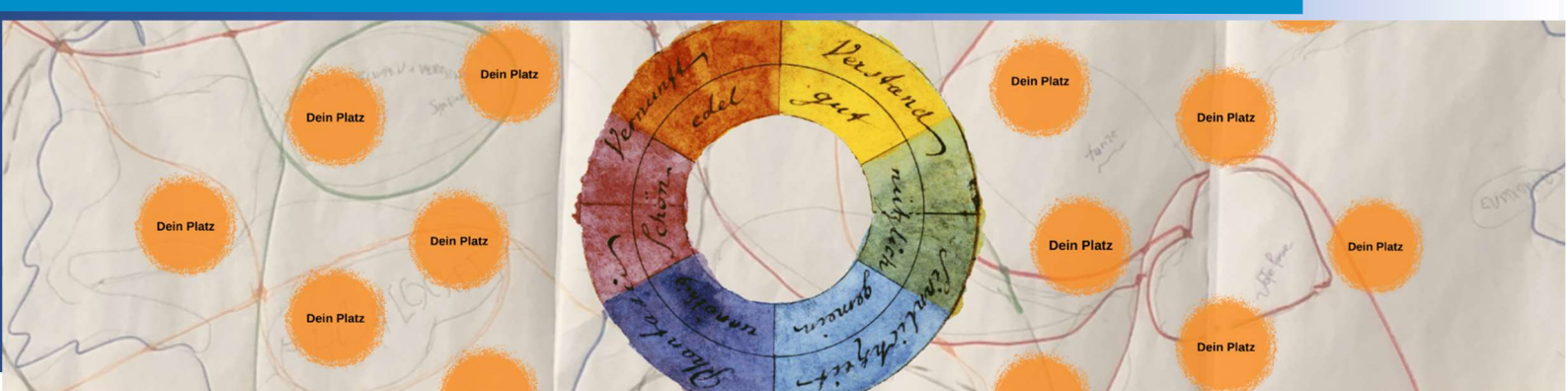
LiFT Leadership for Transition

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0. Abstract, Preface & Introduction
The Vision of Integral Politics

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Chapter 0
Abstract, Preface & Introduction

Abstract

Politics as we know it lacks the tools, the operating system and the vision to address the challenges humanity is facing at the necessary speed and with the right priorities today. It seems that its very "operating system" that has evolved from the early days of European parliamentarism, consisting of core assumptions about the world, motivational drivers, typical behaviors and instruments for decision-making and problem-solving, is no longer fit for purpose. While global mega challenges call for cross-cutting cooperation and collective intelligence, our party systems continue to reward silo thinking, zero-sum competition and short-time planning.

So if *politics as usual* is outdated, what's the alternative?

This book makes the point for a **paradigm shift in politics based on an integral consciousness.** In view of reinventing politics by upgrading its "operating system" towards "integral", it presents relevant (re)sources and inspirations that have started to describe and identify the essence and implications of integral consciousness over the last hundred years. ----It harvests insights and learnings from a number of inspirational resources, from Sri Aurobindo to Ken Wilber until Quantum Social Science. On this basis, it then spells out the foundations and some of the core principles of an integral paradigm of understanding – and doing politics, along with its added value as compared to the current post-/modern politics we know.

Preface

I have wanted to write a book about integral politics for many years. Now that the LiFT *Politics* project gave me the opportunity to do so, I found the task a lot more challenging than I would have imagined. This has a number of reasons. On the one hand, rather trivially, because of the challenge facing any author who is passionate about their topic: Where to start and what to include, since there is so much to cover, yet space being limited – just like presumably your, dear reader's capacity of quality attention that I prefer not to overstrain in order to keep you happy and present.

Beyond that, on the other hand, two more specific challenges stood out. First, as has become almost a "no-brainer", the world has become more complex and is continuing to do so ever more rapidly with an increasing number of crises to be dealt with simultaneously (the famous VUCA diagnosis). Hence, any description of the stakes that politics is facing seems to almost always lack behind the actual events. This has at least one advantage though: the fact that a new politics is urgently needed becomes more and more evident and hence, less effort is necessary to argue my case.

Second, while the *enjeux* are increasing in magnitude and kind, so are innovations that we see emerging in many parts of Europe and the world. This is the case both inside and outside our existing systems, as well as at their margins, where more and more actors are sensing the need for something qualitatively new.

Obviously, an important accelerator of both the problem (of complexity) and the cure (people self-organizing and self-empowering) was the **Corona crisis** which hit the globe six months after the **LiFT Politics project** had started its work.

While for us, this initially implied that most of our scheduled public co-creative workshops, think tanks and generative spaces either could not take place or had to be moved online, we also found ourselves discussing whether we were still able to "plan" a proposed presentation called "portraits of pioneers" of such an integral politics. The increasingly rapid changes and transformations in the kind of pioneering work we see emerging every day made it difficult to "nail down" what was relevant at a specific point in time.

In other words, both the drivers of change and the emerging responses to it worth mentioning for their novel quality of consciousness and approach are **moving targets**. So trying to get a hold of them resembles the famous endeavor of "nailing a pudding to the wall" (Max Kaase).

But the increasing difficulty to trace, let alone to map all these developments in any convincing way also has a **comforting upside**: It shows that we are already in the midst of the change that integral theory is talking about. We (integralists) are not the lone callers in the desert anymore, as it might have appeared only a few years ago, nor do we have to do the job all alone. Rather, truly transformative change is already happening in many areas. This is incredibly good news!

What's more, this **change is bound to happen – with the necessity of nature,** as great integral theorists of socio-cultural development such as Aurobindo, Gebser and Graves say in unison – as our old paradigms prove their dramatic insufficiency. In view of the meta challenges of his time, Clare Graves, for instance, even said: "there is no need to be worried, if (integral) takes over" (Graves, 1978) recalling German poet Friedrich Hölderlin's verse "but where the danger is, also grows the saving power (*wo*

aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch)". This insight is one of the most intriguing and encouraging messages of integral theory.

Does this mean that we can lean back and relax? Certainly not. But it is a good reason for taking a moment to pause and consider what this current moment of transformation is all about. This book aims to do just that, inviting readers to **look at the challenges of our time through an integrally informed lens,** and spelling out its implications for the domain of politics. More specifically, it sheds light on how the wealth of integral thinking can help us, on the one hand, to better understand where the current challenges of our mostly late (or post) modern societies are coming from. Developmentally speaking, this also implies to explore what patterns of thinking and behavior we are already gradually – and urgently *should* be growing out of, since they have substantially co-produced the problems that humanity is facing nowadays.

On the other hand, the integral lens also illuminates some of the potential avenues that lie ahead of us as humanity makes the leap towards what Graves has termed "**second tier consciousness**". While we cannot immediately look into the future, given the black – or rather: white box of human (co-) creativity, what integral theory *can* do is to provide us with an at least tentative map, identifying the relevant attractors. It can point the way as to the most likely to be expected and hence, most worthwhile to be actively supported overall direction of change, according to the wisdom and science of unfolding emergence. Thereby, it can significantly broaden our horizon of thinking and sensing, as a basis for directing both our co-creative capacities and our productive imagination towards richer, healthier, more connected, and more integral futures.

So while the many actual roads towards integral futures are being paved as we collectively travel them in different parts of the globe, the general map, consisting of multiple dimensions, patterns and (sub) sections, is already there. It can at least point us towards the right direction, the shortest, most promising – or least troublesome ways, as well as to likely pitfalls on those ways. In this sense, integral theory is like **switching on the light in a dark room**!

With an integral map at hand, we don't have to hyper-carefully grope our way forward at (no) sight, painstakingly learning only by trial and error, with the abyss always at reach. Rather, we can set the sails and let the wind of change take us where we need to go. On that journey, we can run carefully designed safe-to-fail experiments to test our understanding and hypothesis about the inner workings of the systems we would like to transform, and on this basis, ultimately, gradually work our way towards that transformation. This is not a trivial thing to offer in times where a lack of orientation appears omnipresent, and where the quest for new vision and narratives can be heard as swelling, polyphonic chorus everywhere.

Luckily, from the perspective of writing this book, the core principles of change are a lot less of a "moving target" than the many faces of change itself (as described above). For despite the rapidly increasing demand in result of the turmoil of our times, the **idea of a new politics based on an integral consciousness** has been around for quite a while and has not changed that much over time. Hence, this direction of focus and travel does not require daily updates of research procedures and strategy.

In turn, this body of knowledge and thinking does deserve broader attention. So far, we lack a comprehensive compendium pulling together the different integrally informed answers to humanity's ancient question: *What is a good society, and how should it be governed?* This is why we will begin our journey here, asking:

- What does the integral vision as it has been developed by a number of thinkers for several decades, if not centuries, have to offer with regard to politics today?

- What would a new, more holistic way of doing politics look like from that perspective?

I wish to thank the authors, late and alive, who have inspired this book. They are among my own greatest inspirations since I have discovered the universe of integral thinking and likeminded approaches. As you will notice, for some reason, most of them are men. Do we need to deplore this? In my view, gender imbalance on the input end is a problem only if it resulted in a corresponding imbalance on the output end, in other words, if the "talk" did not lend itself to be "walked" by each and everyone, including women, with equal benefit. In fact, however, what we do see in the emerging field of integral politics instead, is a striking imbalance in favor of women when it comes to "walking", i.e. implementing the integral vision of politics.

While that is another issue and maybe a next step of a larger inquiry that likely requires a separate book (see for a start already my colleague Indra Adnan's writings on the feminization of politics, Adnan 2020 and 2021), I would like to acknowledge the women who – besides the wonderful men in our team – have contributed to LiFT *Politics* and to this book. I am particularly grateful to Bettina Geiken for countless light and co-creative conversations in the course of co-coordinating LiFT's ride, as well as for valuable feedback to and translations of draft chapters. Together with Anne Caspari and Beth Smith, she has also contributed to chapter 8 of this book. Karen O'Brien, the author of the final chapter 9, has been a constant inspiration throughout the project. Furthermore, I wish to thank Sabine Melchiori and Angelika Pohnitzer (IFIS) for their time and help with editing earlier drafts. Last, not least, I am grateful to Harald Schellander and Indra Adnan for the artwork used for illustrating our cover pages, and to Susanne Goerke for the layout and cover design.

So now, let's dive into the exploration of what we mean by integral politics, starting with an archeology of its most prominent thinkers.

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References

Indra Adnan 2020: The Feminization of Politics
Indra Adnan 2021: The Politics of Waking Up
Clare Graves 1978: Speech on April 17, 1978

Introduction

"The transformation from ego-system consciousness to eco-system consciousness is the single most important challenge to leadership today." (Otto Scharmer)

Why integral politics?

The current state of our world has been described and analyzed extensively by many voices. Humanity is about to work towards its own extinction, as a result of the collateral damages of a style of thinking, living and production that has put the increase of material prosperity of a relatively small group above the health and well-being of the many, of our fellow beings and that of the planet as a whole. This state of affairs has been nicely framed by **Otto Scharmer**, one of the inspirational thinkers presented in this book. He says that "we are collectively producing results that no-body wants" (see chapter 5).

Scharmer argues that the problems we are facing globally today can in one way or another be understood as consequences of the existing dominant worldview or paradigm and its specific blind spots and limitations.
This worldview has already been described much earlier by other inspirational thinkers presented in this book, namely by **Jean Gebser** (in 1949) and **Clare W. Graves** (in the late 1970ies; see chapters 2 and 3). Both of them clearly frame their description of what they call the mental structure of consciousness (Gebser's term) or the modern *ER* level of existence respectively (Graves' term) as a relatively recent, i.e. quite sophisticated worldview that is dominant in most developed societies today. Both of them have also described its limits, which have become more and more obvious over the past decades, causing precisely the multitude of dysfunctional results we are confronted with at the moment.

Even though Gebser and Graves have worked from very different starting points, using very different empirical methodologies, they both agree not only on the benefits and achievements, as well as the shortcomings of the modern structure of consciousness, but also on what is bound to come next.
Both of their models confirm the observation that structures of consciousness and culture (potentially) evolve towards more complex forms as individuals and societies are confronted with new, more difficult existential challenges they need to resolve. Sometimes, these challenges are external ones, but more often than not, they are also a direct result of the features and limitations of the given worldview. This means that there is an **inherent logic to complexity development that can be identified, described and used to predict** and support the next most likely emerging structure. And by definition, the new structure will be able to solve the challenges produced by the previous one through a new kind of thinking, sense-making and actively responding to the given challenges.

While Gebser and Graves have come to these conclusions independently, each of them through many years of systematic empirical fieldwork, another inspirational thinker presented in this book has made similar claims based on a profoundly spiritual inquiry. The Indian mystic and politician **Sri Aurobindo Ghose** was the first one to have used the term "integral" for describing a new quality of being and of doing politics that is grounded in a deep alignment with the ultimate source of life and its inherent dynamics.
He too has observed and anticipated the **unfolding of new structures**, qualities or levels of human consciousness development, and he claimed it to be a process that occurs **with the necessity of nature**, i.e. ultimately beyond our control. Why? Because according to Aurobindo, it is the nature of life to eternally strive for unfolding, development and growth towards new, richer, more intensive qualities of experience, as well as more adequate and more effective forms of problem-solving.

So what does this imply in view of understanding our current situation?

Otto Scharmer argues that the limitations of our present, mostly (post-) modern worldview have caused **three substantial crises**, each of which can be framed as a profound disconnect, in other words, a **relationship crisis:**

- a disrupted relationship between ourselves and the planet (ecological crisis)
- a disrupted relationship between us and our fellow humans (social crises) and
- a disrupted relationship to ourselves (spiritual crisis).

All of these show that our current paradigm of thinking and being in the world is disconnecting us from the deeper sources of life, in other words, the conditions of our own existence. It lacks a sufficiently wide and long-term perspective to consider the consequences of our behavior on other species and the planet. It lacks a sufficient integration of inner and outer needs and qualities to preserve our personal balance, wellbeing and sense of meaning and purpose. Finally, it lacks a sufficient focus on interpersonal qualities and depth in order to meet our own and our fellow beings' deep need for belonging, as a precondition for building and preserving thriving communities and societies on all levels.

New politics is deeper, wider and longer

It is therefore no surprise that what we found to be the essence at the heart of the new paradigm of politics, is a focus that is deeper, wider and taking a more long-term view into the future in order to preserve and maintain our (inter-)connection on all three levels.

Moreover, in order to properly address the crisis and disconnects on all of these three levels, new politics needs to address all of them at the same time, rather than trying to fix one surface symptom after the other. In contrast, our dominant response tends to do the latter, treating each symptom separately and thus, fails to address the root of the problem.

This is where the new, integral paradigm comes in. It holds that in order to match the complexity of the challenges at hand, we as humanity need to **shift the entire** "**operating system**" of our collective ways of thinking, being and acting in the world, including first and foremost that of doing politics, to a more complex, hence, more adequate level. This is, in a nutshell, what integral politics is all about.

What is integral?

Building up on the thinkers presented in this book, we hold that "integral" is the next, more complex and more effective paradigm and that we see emerging as a new psychological, socio-cultural and ultimately also political "operating system".

As a new paradigm, it transcends and includes both the modern and postmodern ones that are currently dominant in most of the western world, as well as all of the previous, less sophisticated operating systems that also continue to inform politics in large parts of the world today (examples are traditional societies, governed by a religious or other dogmatic system, and various forms of authoritarian leadership, up until outright dictatorship and state terrorism).

Note that integral is not about fighting against all of the less complex operating systems in view of eliminating them. For if we take the developmental perspective seriously, this is simply impossible,

because every individual always begins their developmental journey at point zero. Rather, to transcend and include them means accepting the development of consciousness and culture as a fact of life, which allows to see and embrace the up- and downsides of all structures as a precondition for meeting them where they are. This is why we can expect the integral paradigm to be able to meet our current cosmo-local challenges in much more considerate and successful ways.

While this may sound demanding or at least idealistic, the underlying **principle of complexity development and dynamic unfolding** is quite simple. As people (and this includes citizens and political leaders alike) develop and mature, they increase their ability to take, hold and coordinate more and more perspectives. They learn to increase their cognitive understanding of what is happening around them, as well as their emotional empathy with those involved in a given situation, including themselves. All of these competences are of utmost relevance for politics and the working of society in our times of crises.

Unfortunately, the developmental dimension has so far not been a standard ingredient of political analysis. Yet, we hold that it is most needed today in order to not only come up with adequate responses to the climate crises, but also to be able to navigate conflicts between political actors, communities and states more successfully, up until those between authoritarianism and democracy.
If this sounds presumptuous, I'd like to recall Hölderlin's verse "but where the danger is, also grows the saving power". This statement is strongly backed up by integral theory as introduced by the inspirational thinkers presented in this book.

Besides the dimension of complexity development, integral politics as understood here also includes a number of other dimensions and qualities that shape a new quality and paradigm of understanding and doing politics. Among the inspirational thinkers presented below, **Ken Wilber** has provided the most concise and systematic overview of what an "integral operating system" implies (see chapter 4). As the most fundamental principle of his "integral theory", Wilber mentions the integration of inner (subjective and inter-subjective) and outer (objective and inter-objective) dimensions of being.
And as to the inner dimension, one consequence of this principle is a much more explicit focus on what Wilber calls *states*, including inner **states of consciousness** and awareness.

In view of their implications for politics, the dimension of states has been spelled out in most detail by **Otto Scharmer** (chapter 5). In his work on Theory U and the concept of *presencing*, Scharmer proposes a scale of different degrees of conscious awareness, the two poles of which he calls *presencing* and *absencing*. The latter represents a very narrow, self-centered state of mind, with a rather limited ability to perceive things beyond its own habitual way of making sense of the world, tending to narrow down its focus as a result of fear and distrust. In contrast, *presencing* is about increasing our inner presence, empathy and awareness and thereby our ability to see, sense and perceive what is going on around (and inside!) us with much more openness, curiosity and compassion.

Between these two poles, there is a whole spectrum of intermediate states, all of which can be consciously created and accessed both on the individual and collective level, either by training and/or by careful facilitation. Moreover, integral politics is precisely about **consciously working with states of presence and awareness**, with the aim of increasing the degree of presence. For deeper presence helps people to see, sense and intuit more. Hence, it leads to deeper qualities of insight and understanding and, on this basis, increases the range of options for political action and decision-making beyond automatic, habitual responses. Given Scharmer's analysis of the three disconnects mentioned above, the method of *Presencing* is the antidote that allows us – and our systems – to pause, to stop

moving on autopilot, and to start exploring alternative future possibilities based on a deeper awareness of what is actually going on.

Ironically, it is this quality and ability to pause and to slow down that ultimately allows integral consciousness to be so much more effective in solving "wicked problems". Note that, as Clare Graves has found out already in the late 1970s, this is not due to a higher kind of intelligence, but to a different way of thinking (see chapter 3).

This new kind of thinking, sense-making and acting has already taken root to some degree in the world of business and organizations, as our sixth inspirational thinker, **Frederic Laloux**, has described. Laloux holds that what he calls the **TEAL (integral) paradigm of organizing** is much more effective (and attractive) due to three main features that we are discussing here as inspirations for a new politics.

First, its decentered perspective has the TEAL operating system organize work exclusively around a shared core **purpose**, instead of serving specific interests. Putting the deeper WHY into the center of politics, we think, would dramatically shift our focus and resources towards desirable futures, instead of wasting time and energy in useless, narrow-minded and often ego-driven trench wars.

Second, the principle of **wholeness**, allowing people to be present and to engage with their full selves, helps to clear obstacles standing in the way of a deeper quality of integrity on the level of individual political actors, as well as of entire organizations and institutions, thereby also serving their higher purpose.

While the third principle (**self-management**) might appear as a no-brainer in political contexts, Laloux' take on it heavily supports what Aurobindo has claimed to be one of the foundations of good politics. He argues that it needs healthy, i.e. self-organizing communities all the way down to the smallest units, i.e. local communities, families and relationships, for humanity as a whole to thrive in a sustainable way.

This idea has later also been taken up by Ken Wilber and by Hanzi Freinacht. Wilber has further spelled it out in his concept of **holons and holonic development**, suggesting that the health of any larger unit depends on that of its constitutive parts – and their relative autonomy in preserving it.

More recently, this and other elements of the integral vision have been picked up and reframed more explicitly for politics and society by the **Nordic School of Metamodernism.** Building up on integral theory, Hanzi Freinacht's concept of Metamodern Politics (see chapter 7) proposes a set of six new forms of politics that are designed to "outcompete" our current democratic and economic systems through large scale personal development and psychological growth. As part of this, Hanzi suggests, for instance, that enacting integral insights and principles in the realm of the inner bonds within a society might imply to foster and politically support healthy relationship and even love coaching in order to heal the social divide mentioned by Scharmer (see above).

This brief overview of the first seven chapters of this book already shows both the extremely rich heritage of integral thinking and the numerous mutual interrelations between most of the thinkers portrayed here.

Note that we do not subscribe to any specific thinker or approach as *the* ultimate representation of "integral". Rather, we insist on the emerging nature of the new paradigm that will reveal itself to constant co-creative inquiry, and that will eventually be embraced by the leading figures in any society once it is ready for it.

Since the vision of integral politics is deeply committed to the idea of **developmental unfolding**, it would never claim "integral completeness" for any given conceptual model or collection of principles.

Rather, it holds that integral politics as sketched out here has the quality of a **guiding vision,** similar to what Ken Wilber has described as the "pot of gold at the end of a rainbow": It is a beautiful and powerful attractor that can inspire and orient our quest, but that can never be fully reached. And by the way, especially when we are talking politics, refusing to nail down the vision into a closed set of concrete forms or principles also appears as a necessary bulwark against totalitarian instrumentalizations.

Therefore, we don't claim this overview to be complete, nor are we able to do justice to each and every one of the thinkers and approaches presented below in a perfect way. And while much and many more intellectual and spiritual predecessors could be added as pioneers of integral thinking over the last decades and centuries, we had to make a choice about what to include and what to leave out or only refer to as further reading recommendations. This choice is essentially based on the degree of novelty and influence that the selected thinkers and approaches have already had – or are expected to unfold in the near future. However, we hope that our choice of resources does help readers who wish to familiarize themselves with the most important components of the integral paradigm to get a better sense of the differentiated **landscape of concepts and ideas that is informing our vision and understanding of integral politics**.

The below collection of inspirational thinkers grosso modo follows a chronological order, with most of the later ones building up on the earlier ones. Consequently, the later ones tend to reinterpret the formers' work in a new context, based on their respective contemporary challenges, adding new dimensions, questions and layers of insight on these grounds. Considering the first seven chapters authored by Elke Fein, for instance, we can say that the first three thinkers (Aurobindo, Gebser and Graves) have heavily influenced the fourth one, Ken Wilber, while the latter has been a major inspiration to the three thinkers who came after him (Scharmer, Laloux and Freinacht).
Yet, even though Wilber's integral framework stands out as a popular point of reference, we do by no means consider it as the only valid integral narrative. Instead, we refer to Pascal Layman's distinction between "*integralists* (adherents of – mostly Wilberian – integral theory) and "*intgralites*" (practitioners and implementors of the actual integral paradigm, regardless of the labels they might or might not be using (see chapter 7).

As an illustration of the idea of *integralites,* the last two chapters of this book offer two contemporary, practice-based re-framings of integral thinking, each of which is drawing on a more recent innovative stream of science: **Anne Caspari/Beth Smith/Linda Doyle and Bettina Geiken's** chapter on Complexity Science and Complex Adaptive Systems proposes a whole new dimension of insight and practical application of integral thinking, using the Cynefin framework (chapter 8). Building upon David Snowden's work, LiFT's associate partner, the Cynefin Center, has developed a tool for capturing complex landscapes of sensemaking that our team has put in service of a better informed and more differentiated quality of decision-making. As a side-effect of including broader groups of citizens into the sensemaking exercise, regardless of their state or stage of consciousness, the use of the Sensemaker® tool also has the potential to transform our sense of agency into more integral directions.

Finally our Norwegian partner **Karen O'Brien** presents her take on a new integral paradigm of understanding and doing politics based on her work on Quantum Social Science (chapter 9). It is an invitation to engage in what she calls Quantum Social Change. Karen argues that taking quantum theory seriously as a description of how the universe works has powerful implications on the way in which we see our own role as drivers of change. Moreover, seeing ourselves as interconnected and entangled entities in a quantum world – who so far have worked together only to create the mess we are currently in – might also help us to do the opposite from now on: seeing and jointly implementing radically new

"solutions that are (merely) obscured by the current lens". For as Alexander Wendt puts it: "in a quantum world lots of things are possible that aren't in a classical one". All we need to do is "to expand our conception of social reality altogether", in the direction proposed by Hanzi Freinacht, who holds that **reality consists of "actuality + potentiality"** (see chapter 7).

With this, we wish you an exciting and inspiring ride through the universe of integral thinking about politics, based on the resources presented in this book. We have made no effort to summarize our findings beyond the narrative proposed in this introduction, nor are we, for the reasons explained above, providing a complete list of principles of integral politics up front. Rather, our aim is to let you, dear reader, explore these principles yourselves, using the following chapters as learning materials.

Just as democracy and good politics are evolving entities, we thereby invite you to be part of our joint process of ongoing inquiry into the spirit and practice of a new politics informed by integral consciousness. May the experience of reading and exploring the LiFT *Politics* resources, together with that of our Learning Labs and related activities, give you a taste of integral politics' distributed and *collective intelligence*-based approach to sensemaking and to co-creating better futures on these grounds. Welcome into this exciting endeavor!