

# Reflections upon Reading Elke Fein's and Coauthors' Book Foundations, Principles and Inspirational Resources of Integral Politics<sup>1</sup>

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Elke Fein and her co-authors have done us a great service in offering comprehensive reviews of foundational frameworks relating to integral politics, ranging from early thinkers, such as Sri Aurobindo and Jean Gebser, to more recent conceptualizations. Most people interested in practicing integral politics (in the broad sense of working with societal issues) will not be in a position to go to the sources and actually read the books by the likes of Jean Gebser or Clare W. Graves. Fein's thorough reviews makes it possible for a larger number of interested people to develop a firm understanding of how core frameworks in the field were developed and what they have to offer. This text is not a book review, but rather reflections on the state of the field, as it is presented in the book. I will just give a brief overview of the focus and contents of the book and then discuss some areas in need of more work.

*This book is not about political science.*

First of all, however, it might be useful to clarify what is meant by “integral politics” in the book. In focus here is the *practice* of politics by different types of actors, not political *science*, i.e., the scientific study of different aspects of politics. In the relatively brief introduction Fein describes the purpose of the book in this way:

This book aims to [...] invit[e] readers to look at the challenges of our time through an integrally informed lens, and spelling out the latter's implications for the domain of politics. More specifically, it sheds light on how the wealth of integral thinking can help us, [...] to better understand where the current challenges [...] are coming from. (p. 18)

Fein believes that:

[... the integral lens] 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. (p. 19)

The central concern underlying the book project is expressed in terms of two basic questions:

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<sup>1</sup> Foundations, Principles and Resources of Integral Politics. With contributions by Anne Caspari/Beth Smith/Bettina Geiken, Karen O'Brien and Indra Adnan, 2023, Tredition.

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- 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? (p. 20)

So, it is clear that this book is meant to offer perspectives on *doing* integral politics, rather than reviewing empirical science relevant to integral politics. This explains why there are no reviews of empirical research on, for example, developmental patterns of political meaning-making, such as in the contributions of Shawn Rosenberg, Deanna Kuhn, Philip Tetlock, Peter Suedfeld, Verna DeLauer, Elke Fein and others, which Fein has written about elsewhere (see Fein & Jordan, 2016).

## A Brief Summary of the Contents of the Book

The main part of the book is made up of seven chapters, written by Elke Fein, that each gives a comprehensive overview of the frameworks developed by eight “thinkers”: Sri Aurobindo, Jean Gebser, Clare W. Graves, Ken Wilber, Otto Scharmer, Frederic Laloux and Hanzi Freinacht (pseudonym for Daniel Görtz and Emil Ejner Friis). Of these authors, only Clare Graves was a researcher, the others developed their frameworks outside the academic institutions (even though some of them were trained in scientific work, or held some type of academic position for some period). In each chapter, Fein gives a brief biographical overview of each thinker’s background, summarizes the framework and core reasoning, and comments on what the respective frameworks have to offer for the shaping of integral politics. In some of the chapters Fein critically discusses limitations and problems of the framework presented, in others she mostly offers a review of main traits.

The last three chapters of the book are written by collaborators of the main author, and give overviews of three further approaches relevant to integral politics. Chapter 8, by Anne Caspari, Bethan Smith and Bettina Geiken reviews the potential contribution of complexity science, mostly based on the work of Dave Snowden and his associates (the Cynefin framework and the SenseMaker methodology). In chapter 9, Karen O’Brien discusses how a perspective inspired by quantum theory can inform how we understand and practice politics. Chapter 10, by Indra Adnan, discusses how feminine experiences and perspectives can provide important impulses for how we approach politics.

## What is “Integral” in Integral Politics?

Coining a name for a particular form of politics implies that there are particular properties of this approach that sets it apart from other existing ideologies, political meaning-making systems, ways of doing politics and ways of organizing political life. In the book, Fein refrains from offering a clear definition of integral politics, such as spelling out what differentiates integral politics from other forms of doing politics. However, she does point to some central assumptions. Obviously, a core conception in integral theory is that human beings and collectives develop through recognizable and recurring patterns of meaning-making, behavioural systems and ways of

organizing. Some frameworks centre on stage models, while others are less closely intertwined with stage conceptions.<sup>3</sup>

[...] the vision of integral politics is deeply committed to the idea of developmental unfolding [...]. (p. 28)

One aspect of “developmental unfolding” is a gradual increase in awareness of and skills in dealing with complexity. One defining property of integral politics is a more well-developed capacity to manage complex conditions and processes than what can be found in “conventional” politics.

[...] the new integral paradigm [...] 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. (p. 24)

So, a “more complex” understanding of societal issues is obviously one characteristic of integral politics. However, “more” is, of course, a very vague term, so a more stringent effort to spell out what difference “integral” would make would require a deeper dive into developmental theory and analysis (such as offered by the models of hierarchical complexity and skill theory by Michael Commons et al. and Kurt Fisher et al., or by the dialectical thinking framework by Michael Basseches and Otto Laske).

Further formulations in the introduction hint at regarding a holistic perspective and a long-term view as core properties of integral politics:

[...] 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 [referring to relationships between ourselves and the planet; between us and our fellow humans; and to ourselves]. (p. 24)

Fein also emphasizes the importance of abilities to operate in a flexible and integrative way with different perspectives:

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, as a basis for their sensemaking and acting in the world. They learn to increase and differentiate their cognitive understanding of what is happening around them, as well as their emotional empathy with those involved in a given situation, including themselves. (p. 25)

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<sup>3</sup> Dave Snowden, whose approach is presented in chapter 8, even strongly rejects the validity of the whole field of adult development theory.

## Ten Principles of Integral Politics

It would have been useful if the book had a concluding chapter with an analytical and integrative summary of the vision of integral politics that emerges across the ten frameworks presented in the book. In personal communication with Fein, I learned that she had wanted to write such a chapter, but the timeline for the publishing process did not allow her to do that. But after the completion and publishing of the book, Fein did take on the task of formulating a synthesis and has presented it in the form of ten principles for integral politics in a couple of recorded seminars, the latest of which is in German.<sup>4</sup> The ten principles are, in my somewhat adapted translation (cleared with Fein):

Integral politics:

1. Integrates more perspectives, in particular inner dimensions
2. Is based on a developmental understanding of political action logics
3. Works with states of presence and awareness
4. Is grounded in spirituality: connected with all living beings
5. Serves a higher purpose, the common good, that transcends particularistic perspectives
6. Translates the integral understanding of the nature of human beings into corresponding structures, institutions and politics
7. Translates theory into experiential praxis
8. Acts with lightness and playfulness
9. Rethinks agency on the basis of a quantum social science paradigm
10. Offers space for not-knowing and emergence

So here we have one learned scholar's summary of the distinctive properties of integral politics. It seems the conceptualization of what is integral in integral politics centers on:

- A well-developed capacity to **relate to different perspectives** and make use of their specific contributions, rather than operating embedded in a single perspective (“monological rationality”).
- A conviction that there are recognizable systems of political meaning-making that are ordered in a **developmental** sequence, and that this insight is of central importance for understanding politics and for improving how we do politics.
- An emphasis on the need to scaffold **states** of consciousness in order to engage political issues with open-ended presence and awareness.
- A fundamental concern for the **well-being of the whole**, i.e., all of humanity and the global ecosystem, rather than being exclusively identified with a part.
- A well-developed capacity to **perceive and navigate complexity** (which is not explicitly mentioned in the ten principles, but emphasized in the book).

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<sup>4</sup> Integrale Politik - 10 Prinzipien für ein neues politisches Betriebssystem, in English *Integral politics – 10 principles for a new political operation system*. [https://youtu.be/DeMbtI5PnRQ?si=ZyRllkb8t3Hrtf\\_f](https://youtu.be/DeMbtI5PnRQ?si=ZyRllkb8t3Hrtf_f)

## So, What do the Reviewed Frameworks Have to Offer?

My general impression after reading this book is that yes, “integral politics” has the potential to become a significant, inspiring, energizing and generative framework that might contribute to a much-needed transformation of the way we do politics. But there is *a lot* of work to be done in order to realize this potential. Maybe one of the most important functions “integral politics” might have is to lay bare and articulate the forms of meaning-making and the action logics of more effective ways of managing complex societal challenges. Integral politics, as presented in this book, seems to be in an early stage of development. But there are, of course, many initiatives, practices, politically active individuals and organizations, methods and institutionalized political processes that to a significant extent fulfil the criteria of being integral, as outlined above, without using the label “integral.” Integral politics might possibly provide a discourse for clarifying the underlying principles that makes those forms of doing politics transcend conventional politics in fruitful ways.

Fein denotes the creators of the seven frameworks she reviews as “thinkers,” and that says something. The frameworks are to a large extent results of efforts to formulate very general patterns of meaning-making, often extrapolating from studies of the patterns of meaning-making of individuals, and then using deductive reasoning to point to implications for political action and forms of governance. There is a considerable lack of specifics and of empirical grounding. Would the broad patterns, e.g., stage models, prove valid in more detailed studies of real-world politicians or other political actors grappling with specific political issues? How would we even go about studying that (yes, there are examples of scholars who did that kind of work, but the volume of studies is small)?

## Some Tasks for the Field

From my own point of view, the most urgent task is to attend to the *theories and methods of change* that would indicate the types of action that can be effective in working with what we have, in terms of how politics is done now, in order to transform doing politics, including the processes of political decision-making, and how governance institutions are structured. For example, what can be done to scaffold development of how various types of actors do politics, along the lines described by developmental frameworks? The frameworks reviewed in the book are rather weak on spelling out the strategies for supporting transformative change. Again, this does not mean that such strategies do not exist, but that the strategies that have been developed and are in use have not been connected to the nascent field of integral politics to any significant extent.

Ironically, the most concrete chapter of the book, in terms of presenting a methodology for scaffolding capacity development in relation to complex political issues, is the one on the framework of Dave Snowden and his associates (in particular the SenseMaker methodology). “Ironically,” because Snowden strongly rejects the validity of adult development frameworks, such as those reviewed in the chapters of Aurobindo, Gebser, Graves, Wilber, Laloux and, to some extent, Freinacht. Otto Scharmer’s and associates’ Theory U also provides a concrete methodology, arguably highly relevant to integral politics even though it does not refer to *stages* of consciousness development but works with transforming *states* of consciousness. However, the methodology evolved and has been primarily used in the field of organizational development and has only recently been used in relation to broader societal issues and then only in a very limited way.

## Concluding Comments

The frameworks reviewed by Fein show us the contours of a system of political meaning-making that transcends very significant limitations of developmentally earlier systems of meaning-making. That means we have a vision (or a couple of visions) of what might be possible, and a hope that there could be a kind of politics that would be far more capable of taking on very serious challenges the world faces than “conventional” politics. This is very valuable, but it seems that we are just at the beginning of finding out what integral political meaning-making and practices can look like in real political action. There are, of course, politicians, officials, change agents, political activists, etc. who embody action logics that fit the pattern of integral politics as described in Fein’s book, even though the vast majority of them do not identify with the label “integral” or “metamodern.” There is a lot of work to do in codifying what integral political practice is, in order to refine, ground and validate the principles of integral politics, so they can be communicated and understood more clearly and in broader circles.

I do believe that this book can serve a very important purpose, in providing a very accessible, but comprehensive, overview of both the origins of theoretical frameworks informing integral politics, and more recent promising developments. In my reading, this overview shows that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in order to give “integral politics” a solid foundation, as well as providing theories of change and methods of scaffolding that can have concrete impact of our societies’ capacities for working with the immense challenges the global society face.