



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Education and/or Transformation?

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More knowledge about the ecological and social problems we are facing will not lead to the transition to a degrowth or postcarbon society. This is the central assumption of the social psychologist Harald Welzer in his essay with the (originally German) title "Mental infrastructures. How growth came into the world and into our souls". What does that mean for a political education for degrowth? Political education aims in most cases precisely at the transmission of knowledge (Welzer uses the German word „Aufklärung“) in order to change mind-sets and habits. But does it work? This stirring paper explores – based on Welzers essay – the possible implications of Welzers thesis for our educational practice.

1. Growth and the idea of unlimited progress has not only shaped our social, economic and political infrastructures but also our souls - our mental infrastructures

Considering the very short historic period of high economic growth rates we have experienced in the 20th century, Harald Welzer raises the question, why growth has been able to define societal goals and determine collective and individual behaviour so dramatically that at present it seems almost impossible to break with this path. He therefore tracks mental infrastructures of growth back to a number of cultural concepts that became influential even before growth was a relevant measure in economic thinking. These concepts are usually considered central and constitutive to the modern society and are mental infrastructures in the sense that they are so strongly internalized that we are hardly able to see and reflect them any more: future, individualization and biography, indefinite progress and the indefinite self-improvement of the „entrepreneurial self“ (see also Bröckling 2007).

Just to give the general idea: The concept of „future“ is very closely linked to the modern concept of the individual and what we call an individual biography. Social structures like family, status, region etc. have become very flexible and allow us – and force us! - to shape our lives individually. This and the high life expectancy in the rich countries allows people to perceive themselves as individuals with a future that can be planned and dreamed of.

The idea of *indefinite* progress und growth came up with industrialization and the until then unknown acceleration of technological innovation, which seemed to decouple human development from any biological restraints people had known until then. In combination with the concept of biography this idea of indefinite progress has been transferred from society to individuals: an individual biography means not only the possibility to form ones life as one wishes. It also implies that you have to „make something out of it“ and leads to the undeniable and never-ending task to improve ones knowledge, skills, manners and social networks. This only peaks in the EU-programmes of "lifelong learning". It is a struggle that never ends, and probably one of the mental infrastructure also well known to most degrowth activists...

But we are not only shaped by these historical concepts, we are also surrounded by "things" and structures that surround us NOW at present, by the way things are done, products are designed, sold, used and thrown away. By the habit to express personal growth in consumer acts, a new outfit, in exotic and adventourous trips or extravagant sports activities. By cities and infrastructures designed for increasing consumption and increasing mobility. By the experience that no one is ever "done".

2. Mental infrastructures prevent us from living sustainably and really starting to build a degrowth society - even though many of us see the necessity and urgency of transformation.

As the transformation to a degrowth society might require a radical break with many or at least some of these inherited mental and social infrastructures, Welzers essay points out once again, how deeply the necessary transformation will change our society - and how deeply it might have to change us!

At the same time business as usual reaches absurd new levels. Apparently knowing about problems doesn't help so much to really adress them: There is a wide consensus within the field of Environmental Sociology that even high environmental conciousness correlates very weakly with appropriate behaviour (p.e. Andreas Diekmann/Peter Preisdörfer 2001). But under which conditions are individuals more likely to act as they say? The classical Environmental Sociology ususally seems to refer to a model of cost-benefit-calculation of the economic (wo)man, which doesn't explain very much.

Welzers very rough draft of an explanation through mental infrastructures in comparison seems to be more promising - also for strategic conclusions for a degrowth education:

- a. His reconstruction of inherited and constantly renewed mental infrastructures explain why we keep on searching for primarily technological solutions: because we just can't believe that there might really be an end of the linear development we have lived in the last centuries.
- b. Why we still focus on rising our societal and personal productivity in order to „seize the day“, why many of us work too many hours and therefore contribute

to the acceleration of society and its flow-through.

c. He explains - along with other consumer sociologists - why consuming ever more goods and services is still so central to our society although basic material needs are met: because the things we consume have more than a practical function, a symbolic function. Welzer calls this phenomenon "things telling stories about us", which means we use them to present us and to form our identity. They help us to "grow" personally - through experiences we are able to make when we travel - and stretch out „beyond ourselves“ - through interests we are able to express by our furniture, clothes and book shelves.

3. What are the (political) goals of a degrowth education?

I don't want to address education in general here, but a certain type which I call „political education“. I define this as a form of education with the explicit goal of contributing to social transformation in a specific direction, in this case: a transformation towards degrowth.

So how does political education contribute to the transformation to degrowth? From my perspective, most educational formats in the field aim at informing people with the goal to have them change some of their daily habits. Participants of workshops and seminars learn about social and ecological problems and then are encouraged either to „consume“ differently, consume less, live more sustainably... or to engage in the movement and strive for a political and economic system change.

But does this strategy work? Not if we take mental infrastructures seriously. So we have to rethink the methods of our teaching and learning processes for a degrowth society. We have to ask: How can political education support people who would like to change day to day habits but find it difficult due to the mental infrastructures determining our daily habits and due to social pressure arising from the habits of the people surrounding us?

4. What does a political education aiming at a transformation of mental infrastructures look like? - First Ideas

In our own educational work at the Konzeptwerk in Leipzig we are in the process of reflecting our seminars and workshops in order to address the questions above. Concrete proposals we are discussing are to...

- a. reduce the knowledge input in seminars/workshops drastically.
- b. to tell new and positive „stories“: invite people to existing projects in their local environment which inspires them to take part in social-ecological structures, that have the potential to change parts of their daily experiences.
- c. to invite people to start their own, collective projects in their very environment: a free bookshelve in the classroom, a repair-cafe on the campus, a clothes-exchange-party... which can be an experience of self-efficacy and of

(small scale) social change.

d. have a lot more practical parts in the workshops, where people can work with their hands and produce something practical and/or beautiful that they can use in their daily lives. This may foster a feeling of self-efficacy linked with degrowth technologies and with repaired, self-made and low-carbon objects.

e. reflect on ones mental infrastructures on a personal and also biographical basis – p.e. through theatre pedagogical methods and biographical researches.

5. Open Questions – to be discussed during the GAP

- What educational formats are helpful to foster the Great Transformation towards a Degrowth society?
- How can these ideas be integrated in the usually very limited formats of 1-day-workshops, in school class environments...?
- What role do handcraft-skills play for a degrowth education?
- What other possibilities do we have to train ourselves to act more likely according to our beliefs – p.e. in situations of high social pressure?
- Which mental Infrastructures do we want to change? How do we differentiate between „bad“ habits that lead to growth and interlinked positive and deliberating concepts? Do we really want to question the concept of Individuality/Selfhood/Self-fulfillment and what do we loose if we do so?

- Are these questions radical enough? Or: Is education a helpful tool at all if we want to foster social change? Or do we have to apply totally different strategies?

Literature

Harald Welzer (2011): Mental infrastructures. How growth entered the world and our souls; <http://www.boell.de/en/2013/12/09/mental-infrastructures-how-growth-entered-world-and-our-souls>