

Mental Infrastructures and Degrowth Transformation

Introduction



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Leipzig Course, 8th-11th September 2014



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Roadmap

1. What are mental infrastructures?
A concept by Harald Welzer
2. Examples of mental infrastructures of growth – in the world and „in our souls“
3. Do mental infrastructures keep us from social change and how can we fool them?



O. The context

Harald Welzer (*1958)



- Grandpa wasn't a Nazi (2002)
- The end of the world as we know it (2009)
- Mental infrastructures – How growth entered the world and our souls (2011)
- Think yourself - instructions to oppositions (2013)



EINE ANLEITUNG ZUM WIDERSTAND

1. Alles könnte anders sein.
2. Es hängt ausschließlich von Ihnen ab, ob sich etwas verändert.
3. Nehmen Sie sich deshalb ernst.
4. Hören Sie auf, einverstanden zu sein.
5. Leisten Sie Widerstand, sobald Sie nicht einverstanden sind.
6. Sie haben jede Menge Handlungsspielräume.
7. Erweitern Sie Ihre Handlungsspielräume dort, wo Sie sind und Einfluss haben.
8. Schließen Sie Bündnisse.
9. Rechnen Sie mit Rückschlägen, vor allem solchen, die von Ihnen selber ausgehen.
10. Sie haben keine Verantwortung für die Welt.
11. Wie Ihr Widerstand aussieht, hängt von Ihren Möglichkeiten ab.
12. Und von dem, was Ihnen Spaß macht.



Ein Buch von
S. FISCHER





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O. The context

Harald Welzer - interesting questions raised

- Why don't we achieve social change although most people know it's necessary?
- What's the role of the cultural sphere in this question?
- How can we strategically address a cultural change in order to “save the world”?
- And for us personally:
What does this mean for our educational practice?



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1. Mental infrastructures

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Material/institutional infrastructures
vs. mental infrastructures

„Institutional infrastructures regulate growth; the material ones manifest it; and mental infrastructures translate it into lifeworlds, equipping the inhabitants of growth societies with the associated biographies and notions of self.“



1. Mental infrastructures

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Mental infrastructures can be:

- (Historical) sociocultural formations
 - Non-reflective assumptions about the world and about us
 - Our ideas about „growth“, „future“, „progress“, „happiness“, „mobility“...
- Daily routines, habits and patterns of perception and interpretation
 - Products and infrastructures (p.e. of the consumer society) surrounding us and telling us „their stories“ about the world...



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2. Mental infrastructures of growth

- a) The growth paradigm: a powerful promise
- b) Other socio-cultural formations sustaining growth
 - Bookkeeping and the „Economic (Wo)man“
 - Acceleration and the shrinking of the present
 - Efficiency and the Knowledge society
- c) Daily routines and habits, patterns of perception and interpretation



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a) The growth paradigm

- Almost religious status of growth in the sphere of economic theory and in the sphere of „Realpolitik“
- No politician can afford to renounce from growth as a solution for all sorts of problems



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a) The growth paradigm





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a) The growth paradigm

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a) The growth paradigm



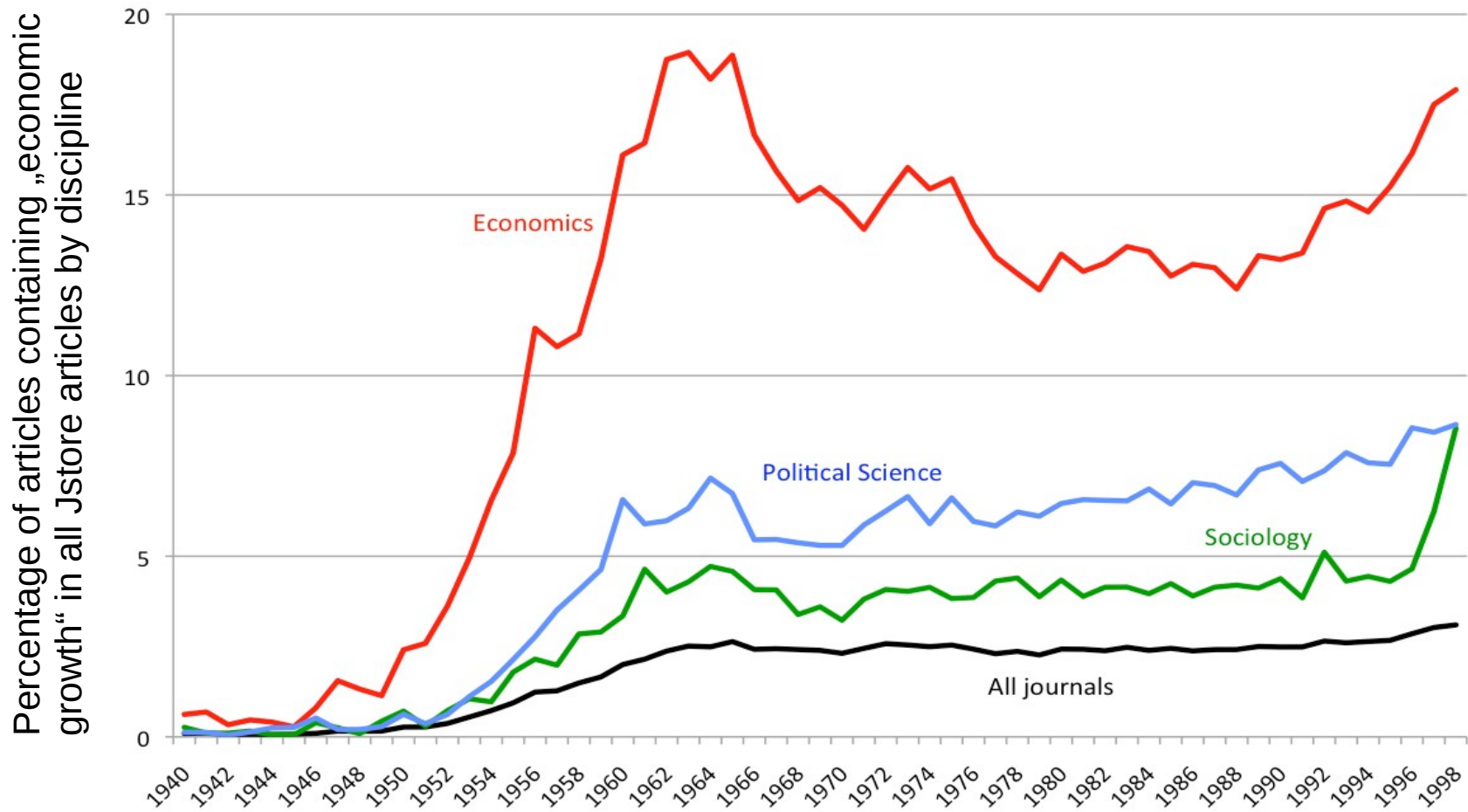


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a) The growth paradigm

On the other hand:

importance of the concept is relatively new –
rise not before the postwar period





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a) The growth paradigm

So how was it possible for this concept to shape the economic and political sphere so deeply in such a short period of time?

- Material base: exploitation of fossil fuels makes (continuous) growth possible
- Mental base: Along with changing material conditions new ideas about development, progress, growth etc. evolve that sustain the growth paradigm
- Political interests: The concept itself becomes especially powerful within the systemic competition of the cold war + as the promise to reduce social inequality



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b) Sociocultural formations

- Bookkeeping and the „Economic (Wo)man“
(Harald Welzer & Ulrich Bröckling)
- Acceleration and the fulfilled live
(Harald Welzer & Hartmut Rosa)
- The Knowledge society
(Christine Ax)



Bookkeeping and the „Economic (Wo)man“



- Concept of „future“ within earthly life is relatively new (17th century)
- The other side of the medal: imperative to produce a life's work on earth!
- Emerging book keeping in the new middle class of entrepreneurs (Max Weber): Allows continuous improvement of processes: no time may be wasted and no action may be unproductive



Bookkeeping and the „Economic (Wo)man“

The effect:

Nothing is ever finished.

The work never stops.

It is the idea of infinite growth.



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Bookkeeping and the „Economic (Wo)man“

“The mental infrastructure of a subject that ever regards itself as nothing but the precursor of its next step up the ladder is reflected in concepts such as lifelong learning and productive aging and in esoteric quests to discover one's true self and positive way of living – endeavors that have as little chance of ever achieving their goals as have the self-exploiting fetishes of the laptop users who populate the world's trains, planes and waiting areas: None of them will ever be done.” (HW)



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Acceleration and the „Fulfilled Life“

- Modern society (Hartmut Rosa):
 - Acceleration of economic and technological innovation
 - Acceleration of the Pace of Life
 - Acceleration of the social change
- Linked to the modern ideal of a „fulfilled life“
 - Autonomy! Authenticity!



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Acceleration and the „Fulfilled Life“

- Cracks in the picture:
 - Acceleration has reached the point of „speedy standstill“: Running in order to „keep up“
 - Too many options for experiences keep us from experiencing: the shift from consuming to buying



Acceleration and the „Fulfilled Life“

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Acceleration and the „Fulfilled Life“

Hartmut Rosa:

The desire for autonomy and authenticity must be replaced – or at least complemented – by a desire for „resonance“.



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The Knowledge Society

Christine Ax (german philosopher, expert on handcraft):

- degradation of practical skills and a strong valuation of theoretical knowledge and sciences since 19th century
- Strengthened by the concept of the „knowledge society“ (1960ies)
- Problematic confusion of „knowledge“ and „information“



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The Knowledge Society

Effects of the degradation of practical skills are the loss of practical skills among many members of the society as well as a vanishing importance of handcraft.

Why is this a problem?



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The Knowledge Society

Why is it a problem?

Christine Ax describes handcraft as

- a working culture that puts the working person with his/her skills AND knowledge in the center of the working process, allowing a high rate of autonomy and self-efficacy
- oriented towards the satisfaction of needs, towards a high quality of the products as well as to repair and low resource use
- compatible with a regional and small-scale economy



The Knowledge Society

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Daily routines and habits

- Mental infrastructures are not only tied to major sociocultural formations, but are also strongly shaped by our daily routines and habits and by our patterns of perception and interpretation
- These are – in turn – shaped by material and institutional infrastructures of our world



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Daily routines and habits

For example: Consumer culture

- consumption has become the function of giving us a sense of meaning and purpose, shows us that we lead a successful life
- the purchase of a possession allows us personal growth beyond the measure of the individual
- Shift from consuming to buying: symbolic value grows even more important



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Daily routines and habits

Objects and products tell stories about us

- „every shower gel we use, with the meticulous design of its bottle and the plop of the cap optimized by sound designers“
- „every car dealer tell stories about our love of technology and speed“



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Daily routines and habits

These stories add up to so much more than what dedicated, paid professional narrators and storytellers from the worlds of science or journalism can tell us.





3. How do mental infrastructures keep us from social change and how can we fool them?

- The main problem: mental infrastructures are not a result of reflection or decision, they are simply a „massive world unto itself“
- They make it hard to think „outside the box“ - p.e. a world without cars
- Solutions of the future are usually thought within moderate technological progress



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3. How do mental infrastructures keep us...

Peter Vossler (Royal Dutch Shell CEO in the ADAC Motorwelt, 2010):

“We will see a greater diversification of drive technologies and fuels or energy sources. The automotive concepts and technologies used will be determined by the application: City and short-haul traffic will be increasingly hybridized or electrified; diesel vehicles will remain first choice for overland and long-distance travel. The backbone of road traffic is, and will remain, the traditional internal combustion engine. [...] If short to medium-term success in the fight against climate change are to be achieved, this will only be possible with the eternal combustion engine.”



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3. ...and how can we fool them?

So, what do we do?

More knowledge will not help us. Changing our mental infrastructures therefore would mean changing the very practices that have made such a lasting and deep impression on our awareness

- we need products that speak to us in different voices
- we need other narratives to tell about ourselves, p.e. one looking back from a possible future: Who would we like to have been in the past?
- we need guiding ideas that “dovetail” almost naturally into our day-to-day-lives and lifestyles



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...and how do we fool them?





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Questions? Discussion!



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Literature

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