

The Theory of Growth Points

This text summarizes a video dialogue between Howard Richards and Evelin Lindner created on 23rd April 2012 in Limache, Chile. The summary was compiled by Evelin Lindner. The video was recorded by William Thompson.

In this video, Howard Richards offers the Theory of Growth Points as a methodology for creating a viable world.

This summary points at these articles (see their full texts on www.humiliationstudies.org):

- the article “Culture Change” that Howard Richards wrote together with Joanna Swanger in 2008
- a PowerPoint presentation by Richards of “What Exactly Does Bourdieu Mean by Habitus?”
- Howard Richards’ essay “What Does it Mean to Be a Left Wing Economist Today.”

Howard Richards offers the Theory of Growth Points as a methodology for creating a viable world.

At the root of the Theory of Growth Points is the understanding of cause and effect. Howard Richards’ main claim is that norms, reasons, etc., are causes. The practical consequence is that to change society, we have to change norms. So, we need a methodology to change those norms, and the Theory of Growth Points offers such a methodology.

This claim starts with Aristotle. People do what they do, because they decide to do it. And institutions and social structures are made of norms also known as rules (norms and rules are treated as equivalent here). They can all be interpreted in a humanistic framework that stresses rule-following as an ethical activity.

See, for example, Karl Marx (Richards wrote the essay “What Does it Mean to Be a Left-Wing Economist Today,” where Richards shows that Marx can be reframed humanistically in terms of rule-following). See also Émile Durkheim and his notion of normlessness or anomie. Note, furthermore, Max Weber’s fundamental concept of *Germeinschaftshandeln*, which can be similarly interpreted. Weber differentiates various types of rationalities: instrumental rationality, typical of modernity, takes place in the legal rational framework of capitalism and bureaucracy. It is always based on law as understood in the Western/Roman tradition. Weber’s views of the different types of rationality can never be separated from norms, which means, that if we want to change the system, we must change the norms, and also the logic. In extension, this implies that to change system, norms, and logic, what is needed, is thinking outside the Western legal tradition.

Also Marcel Mauss is relevant here, as is Romano Harré, who was Howard Richard’s tutor, who wrote, together with Paul F. Secord, about rule-following in *The Explanation of Social Behaviour*. See, furthermore, Charles Taylor, and Peter Winch.

Critics of this view are, among others, Michael Joseph Oakeshott, Clifford Geertz, or Pierre Bourdieu, who all emphasize other key categories instead of rules. Geertz, for example, emphasizes *performances*, Bourdieu emphasizes *pratique*, or the logic of practice, *habitus*. They argue that *pratique* is a better lens for analysis than the idea of rules.

However, according to Howard Richards, “*habitus* is a disposition that generates our practice.” See his powerpoint presentation on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*.

Clearly, says Richards, this discussion depends on how we understand rules. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s discussion of rules entails a more anthropological way of seeing things, in which the careful observation of the infinite complexity of human life shows that there is no essentially correct basic category for understanding it. Choosing to work with rules/norms, as Richards and others do, is a heuristic choice, which is compatible, and recognizes the validity of the insights of thinkers such as Geertz and Bourdieu.

Richards’ main point is to draw our attention to the big mistake to believe that “the problem of our time is power.” His point is that nothing really changes unless the norms/rules change: It is not enough to take power from people.

This discussion is key to trying to make sense of society and of how to change it, asserts Richards.

Using Wittgenstein’s sophisticated discussion of rules has the significant advantage of bringing jurisprudence and social science together: Law is a union of primary rules, such as conduct (for example, left side driving), and secondary rules, or those rules that tell us what the primary rules are. See Herbert L. A. Hart (known as H. L. A. Hart), and his book *The Concept of Law*.

Richards finds the term “constitutive rules” helpful, as it is used by Charles Taylor in “Interpretation & the Sciences of Man,” in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Sep., 1971, where Taylor asks: “Is there a sense in which interpretation is essential to explanation in the sciences of man?”

Richards’ reply: “The answer must be Yes!”

Richards’ main question with respect to economy is the following: “What are the constitutive rules?”

Today, the world system (see Immanuel Wallerstein) has rules that are constituted by Roman-type Law, with its pillars of property, contract, and the individual as a juridical subject.

One can observe the “reception of Roman Law,” for example in Germany, when capitalism began (the Napoleonic Code represents an updating on the Roman Law). Such a “reception” was less needed in the UK, since a Roman-type legal system suitable for capitalism already existed.

The Roman-type legal framework created exclusion. “Civilizing the conquered” meant introducing a civil code that was not based on tribe, religion, or ethnicity (unlike, for example,

Islamic law, etc.; see Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*). All the early empires had features that differed from traditional kin-ship, yet without representing a modern capitalist system, see Karl Polanyi et al., *Trade and Market in the Early Empires*. Roman Law allows people to say: “This property is mine, not anybody else’s” and “no contract’ means ‘no obligation,” while other frameworks don’t use the notion of contracts very much (and even in Rome the notion of contract evolved slowly and did not reach its modern form until the 17th century).

Within this rule-following framework we can understand Ellen Wood’s concept of “systemic imperatives.” It is the normative framework that makes systemic imperatives possible and necessary, for example, the imperative to cut costs, to maintain investor confidence, and so forth. Note Ellen Meiksins Wood and her book *Empire of Capital*. The practical consequence is that to liberate humanity from the systemic imperatives, we need to live by different norms, which does not mean imposing a one-size-fits-all solution; it means “diversity that functions,” something that growth points help create.

This is a way of interpreting what Max Weber called the “iron cage of capitalism.” Growth points are a methodology for escaping the iron cage.

Chile is a very good example. During Salvador Allende’s presidency, capitalism stopped working. People had to stand in line to get matches, or diapers, or bread. Nothing else succeeded in taking capitalism’s place, therefore the economy stopped working.

Systemic imperatives block desirable alternatives in every step. Richards therefore did not go to the Durban Climate Change Conference in November 2011, even though he was in the vicinity, precisely, because he expected the usually stalemate between the ecology and the system, a fight that cannot be won by ecologists without changing the system, and the growth point methodology is a way to achieve this.

The idea of growth points proposes a way forward:

1. We need to achieve something functional, such as, that people are fed, that carbon emissions or domestic violence are stopped, that people are cured, and so on.
2. Growth points have to get us out of unwanted systemic imperatives, and give us the freedom to achieve the above-mentioned aim. This does not imply prohibiting private sector business, it implies only to make it, as Amartya Sen says, governable, and to complement it with other logics. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, it is wrong to claim that there is only one logic around, even though he says that the logic of capitalist accumulation is so pervasive that it deserves special attention.

Next question: How to you find suitable growth points?

We first need to avoid structuralist traps. Even the most well-intentioned measures will fail because the system “booby traps” them. Strikes, for instance, may be well-intended, but then, public opinion turns against the strikers, and the entrepreneurs get cheaper labor elsewhere. Richards experienced this dynamic first hand many years ago, when he was a lawyer helping

to get better wages for people harvesting tomatoes in California. The aim was to give them one and a half dollars per hour, which still was very little. What was the result? The tomato growers moved their activities to Mexico and in addition they devised a machine to harvest tomatoes!

How do we find growth points?

There are 4 or 5 criteria for what a growth point must represent:

1. People have to understand growth points. They have to be manifest in the existing culture. People need to be already doing it. Paolo Freire therefore searched for “themes” already understood by Brazilian peasants to build on.
2. There must be “track energy.” One has to have resources to work with. In other words, it has to be possible. People have to be motivated, one has to have permission, and so forth. Anthony Wilden speaks of two kinds of explanations, meaning (first criterion) and energy (second criterion).
3. It needs to be transformative. Only some cultural changes are possible. We cannot just say that green economics are needed, we have to find turning points to make the necessary possible.
4. Growth points have to contribute to getting us out of structural traps. Human relationships must get less contractual, and we need to get out of dependence on investor confidence. Betty Reardon makes the point is that what is doable is not necessarily worth doing: The best workshop that is doable is perhaps not worth doing. It is only worth doing if it contributes to the structural changes required to get humanity off the endangered species list.

In sum, we have to look for growth points that are already features of existing culture, which lend themselves to transformation. We might compare growth points to genetic mutation. For example, when mammals suddenly had two stomachs, this was only possible due to a transformation of their DNA; not any change whatsoever was possible, only those changes effected by changing the governing code. The consequence was that these mammals could live on grass.

The notion of rights, for instance, existed. The idea of rights could then be transformed to include economic, cultural, and social rights.

Or, the notion of brotherhood existed, and we see how it could be transformed to generate the idea of including sisterhood.

Also the idea of dignity is a very good growth point. The idea existed in Western culture before modern age (Latin: *decorum*), and it meant rank, it identified a person’s place in the feudal hierarchy (a dignitary is a person of high rank). Martin Luther then brought the notion of equality in dignity to the table with his notion of “the priesthood of all believers,” of no rank in the church, of the dignity of all human beings. Immanuel Kant said, “Ein jedes Ding hat einen Preis, nur ein vernünftiges Wesen hat Würde.” (Unfortunately, Kant excluded

women; to his view, they could not vote because they were not rational, and they did not own property, and therefore they had no interest in public affairs. Later, Carol Gilligan argued that women do have dignity, not least because they have reason, however, that we need to ground dignity in something else, not just in rationality, being a patriarchal bias to make rationality the measure of morality. To Gilligan, care is a more suitable measure.)

As to the concept of equality, read Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau and their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* on the idea of equality and how it lends itself to being transformed from basic equality to equality in the family, in the workplace, school, and so forth.