

A FUTURE SOCIETY FUNCTIONING AT THE PARADIGMATIC STAGE?

SARA NORA ROSS

Dare Institute and ARINA, Inc., Bethel, Ohio, USA

The speculative yet theoretically viable notion of a future society performing at the paradigmatic stage is under-examined. Visions of a highly evolved humanity should be supported by rigorously realistic treatment of factors, from the pragmatics of how visions would manifest on the ground to the hierarchical complexity-based challenges of social evolution. The theoretical discourse takes different angles on discussing society at this stage. These include examining moral development; individual–society differences; social systems, principles, and processes; demands on discursive practices and institutions; and the developmental and other demands of complexity in societies’ issues. Is a society at the paradigmatic stage possible?

KEYWORDS: Complexity, discursive practices, evolution, hierarchical complexity, issues, moral development, paradigmatic stage, principles, society.

Visions of what a future, highly evolved society would look like have been part of human culture over the ages, for example, Plato’s *Republic*, More’s *Utopia*, and the Buddhist notion of the Kingdom of Shambhala. Contemporary visions tend to exclude definitions as well as pragmatism about whatever would *account for* getting from “here” to “there” to realize them. The purpose of this article is to bring together several proposals for requirements of a paradigmatic stage society, including my own, with the limited objective to offer brief reflections on their premises, relationships, and possible implications.

IDENTIFYING THE POSSIBILITY

Only a handful of developmentalists to date have applied systematized thought to the notion of a society functioning at this stage. The measurement-based developmental theories reflected in this work were hierarchical complexity and the frameworks of Torbert and Kohlberg (see later). The first two are broadly task-based, whereas the third is concerned with moral reasoning. In referring to the realm of social change theories, not just strictly developmental approaches, Chilton

Address correspondence to Sara Nora Ross, Dare Institute, 3109 State Route 222, Bethel, OH 45106-8225, USA. E-mail: sara.nora.ross@gmail.com

(1991, p. 32) noted that there are two “extreme forms” of social change theories, distinguishable by focusing on either “practical or normative considerations as the source of social change.” These same distinctions have shown up in specifically developmental approaches to societal evolution. As indicated later, most of the attention to high stages of social development reflects the focus on morality. Of course moral norms are often expected to manifest in society. The point is that approaches to societal evolution that take moral development as the organizing framework have an observably distinct perspective.

The formulation and application of the highest stages of moral development, especially as applied to social concerns, had a bumpy start befitting groundbreaking work. Kohlberg worked for years on defining and also defending his description of the highest stages (e.g., Kohlberg, Boyd, and Levine, 1990; Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer, 1983; Kohlberg and Power, 1981; Kohlberg and Ryncarz, 1990; Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, 1989). Nonetheless, Chilton’s (1988, 1991) theorizing about political development employed Kohlberg’s moral stages in considering how the publicly common ways of relating define a political culture. Similarly, Habermas (e.g., 1979, 1990) used Kohlberg’s stages in his theorizing about discourse and the evolution of society.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES TO A PARADIGMATIC STAGE OF SOCIETY

As the limited amount of work in this area has pushed the thinking further, an integration of the moral and the practical has become more obvious through more careful definitions. The hierarchical complexity definitions of the highest stages of task performance were formulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see “Editors’ Introduction” to this issue) and later published (Commons and Richards, 1984a, 1984b; Commons, Trudeau, Stein, Richards, and Krause, 1998). These are content-free, thus not restricted to moral concerns. Hierarchical complexity enabled Sonnert and Commons (1994) to correct assumptions in Kohlberg’s highest stage definitions. They showed how and why, at the paradigmatic stage, “morality is no longer a property of individuals, as it is at earlier stages, but a property of the social enterprise of discourse. This leads to a novel politization of morality and, conversely, to a moralization of politics” (Sonnert and Commons 1994, p. 31). In the process, they pushed the high-stage meaning of moral development squarely into the public square. Considering the nature and limitations of the public square, Sonnert (1994) continued that trajectory in considering the practical challenges inherent in their thusfar conceived paradigmatic society.

For present purposes, more important than the theoretical contribution of Sonnert and Commons (1994) by correcting Kohlberg’s stage definitions is the central characteristic of a paradigmatic society they identified in the process: it depends on actual discourse and actual consensus of participants on solutions proposed in their public discourse. Thus, the paradigmatic stage of social performance in the sociopolitical domain is discursive. It recognizes that no single person or entity can possibly know the first-hand concerns and perspectives of individuals. Therefore, individuals must represent themselves in the process of reaching consensus on

social concerns. For the discourse to perform at the paradigmatic stage, they assume Metasystematic stage 12 performance on the part of participants. The authors contrast Habermas' notion of universal discourse over space and time with their pragmatism. Whether a few or a few hundred participate, the hierarchical complexity of the discourse still scores as paradigmatic by the nature of the discourse's performance. That leads them to acknowledge that such ideal discourses require more time and resources than are reasonable to expect. Further, that there are no paradigmatic designs to coordinate incommensurate social systems. This was demonstrated in the voting system dilemmas they described. Thus, they conclude, in a paradigmatic society there will always be tradeoffs that do not completely satisfy all rights, duties, standards of participation and fair representation, and successful coordinations of individuals' and groups' own competing priorities; for example, in seeking representation in candidate selection. A Paradigmatic stage 13 society would be no Utopia, but it would be a highly participatory one, a *politized* one by virtue of routinely engaging the polis as the way issues were addressed. It would be hard to overstate the importance of this distinction: *politized*, not *politicized*.

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND A PARADIGMATIC STAGE OF SOCIETY

Recognizing the limits of the thusfar described paradigmatic society, Sonnert (1994) addressed some of the resulting theoretical and practical issues from a sociological perspective. Only a few of those issues are mentioned here for the sake of focused brevity. He realistically acknowledged the existence of different stages of performance (1) between individuals and the social group, and (2) among individuals in any social group. If a high-stage conception of moral discourse is deployed, then "the key condition is that the high-stage algorithm is broken down into parts that lower-stage individuals can be coached to perform" (Sonnert 1994, p. 128). His approach to institutions in a paradigmatic society is somewhat similar. Although he admits of the need for institutionalized approaches to discourse, including "discursifying bureaucracies," Sonnert presents and justifies the rationale that the non-idealized society not only includes but *has to* include lower-stage institutions that are non-discursive. This is for the sake of balancing efficiency and resources with the discursive demands. Yet the tasks of balancing all these competing needs are impossible to perform at the paradigmatic stage. Thus, his analysis leads him to the proposal of a metadiscourse that equates to a societal Cross-paradigmatic stage 14 action that set limits to morality and solves these dilemmas. It

addresses the issue of delineating the discursive domain (with its goal of justice) and the nondiscursive domain (with its goal of efficiency). The dichotomy of justice and efficiency becomes an issue in this moral stage. . . . [This] metadiscourse coordinates the multitude of possible discourses [paradigmatic stage] by sequencing, prioritizing, and limiting them. It also has the ability to limit itself . . . a self-referential discourse, determining its own destiny. One outcome of

[this cross-paradigmatic] metadiscourse is a consensus about the modalities of forgoing [paradigmatic stage] consensus, [and] balancing [paradigmatic stage] morality and systems efficiency. . . . [This] reasoning evaluates alternatives of possible systems, making the moral position realistic and the realistic position moral. (Sonnert 1994, p. 131–32)

INTERIM REFLECTION

The foregoing indicates how the use of a morality-based perspective on societal stages surfaces impossible dilemmas and requires the integration of the *ideal* moral with the *real* social and political facts of life. The paradigmatic moral lens assumes and accepts that there are some objective “shoulds” that cannot be performed; for example, high levels of participation in public discourse that “should” engage everyone but never will, and the resulting impossible demands on resources and efficiency.

It is possible that the dependence on a generic notion of discourse contributes to difficulty in defining a society at the paradigmatic order. Discourse is an easy label to invoke from theoretical armchairs. But it has no nuance and no light to shed when it comes to the real world of participatory human interaction on social concerns. I maintain that the first-hand experience of practitioners is essential to shed light on this. This does not mean I diminish the crucial role of theorizing; I do it regularly. Theory can successfully marry practice. For example, Morrow and Torres (2002) demonstrated correspondence between the premises of Habermas the theorist and Freire the practitioner. This is one way to indicate marriages exist between theory and praxis, even if only after—rather than during—theory-development.

Although I regard Chilton, Commons, Habermas, and Sonnert as having some of the highest stage-performances of those who theorize about high-stage society and social evolution, theorists they remain. Practitioners, who may also be theorists, can speak not from only normative armchairs but from the throes of their experiments and experience in actual praxis and sustained reflection thereon. As the following discussions suggest, the integration of theory, praxis, action inquiry, and the resulting potential increases in hierarchical complexity would go a long way toward implementing the very transformation of self, society, and social science for which Torbert (1991, 2000, 2004) has long been an advocate. It would also help us develop additional notions of what a paradigmatic society might look like.

DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICE OF ACTION INQUIRY AND A POLITICAL PRINCIPLE OF INQUIRY FOR A PARADIGMATIC SOCIETY

Torbert is another of the few developmentalists who have considered a paradigmatic stage society. His long-term investment has been in developmental action inquiry theory and praxis to foster the evolution of people, groups, society, and social science to high stages of performance. In his conception of a paradigmatic society Torbert (1991, 2000), *inquiry* is elevated as the preeminent principle when it is the kind of inquiry for which he advocates: that done in first, second, and

third persons for the purpose of timely action. He situates this kind of inquiry in a hierarchy of principles. Together, these would eventually lead to a paradigmatic society when they are enacted together: (1) inquiry, (2) peerdom, (3) liberty, and (4) quality. This paradigm responds to a central social need: “We are missing a . . . political principle—a principle never before recognized as political—the principle of inquiry. *The only political principle that invites the potential transformation of everyone’s perspective is the principle of inquiry*” (Torbert, 1991, 236, emphasis added). This principle is primary, whereas quality is fourth, as the “quaternary political principle, approached only in the context of the commitment, attention, and skill cultivated through ongoing practice of the first three principles” (234). Although hypothetical, it would be Paradigmatic stage 13 actions for a group or society to coordinate multiple Metasystematic stage 12 principles and in doing so, enact a coherent paradigm.

Torbert explicates forms of discourse and power that are essential elements not only of practice but also of realism in a social theory. This can be seen once one recognizes that all persons, institutions, and societies must transform from time to time if they—people, institutions, and societies—are to become increasingly effective, mutual, just, sustainable, and eventually enact the paradigmatic society (Torbert, 1991, 2000, 2004). His formulations shed light on the *purpose, characteristics* and *results* of human action that elevates the principle of inquiry, in the form of practice that is demonstrable as transformative social action (Torbert, 2000, 2004). Thus, developmental action inquiry can transform actors and actions while, and by, enacting a principled paradigm. Torbert takes us to a place well beyond discourse.

OPERATIONALIZING EVOLUTION’S HIERARCHICAL COMPLEXITY

The last developmental theorist, and practitioner, who I am aware of giving sustained attention to the paradigmatic stage of society, is me. I take a considerably different approach. After two decades of work in the arenas of public issue analysis, political development, and public discourse, I have no idealized notions about the probabilities of high-stage performance and quality in the usual public discourse. That discourse is predominately performed at Abstract stage 9 and Formal stage 10, even within Systematic stage 11—inspired dialogue, discussion, and deliberation approaches (see Rosenberg, 2007, Ross, 2006b, 2007a, and Winterstein, 2005 for discussion). My motivations have never stemmed from ideals about the concepts of morality or discourse. I treat both of those terms as mental constructs that can remove us from actual conditions on the ground of individual, social, and institutional life at different stages of development, and thus real-world complexity. Nor does my angle on social evolution reflect motives to transform others and society for the sake of some state of transformation. Instead, my perspective on the necessity of *some* societal performances at the highest stages in *some* societies is pragmatically grounded in the (1) complexity and consequences of public issues, (2) general sociopolitical ineffectiveness at analyzing and addressing them, and (3) developmental realism.

My approach to domestic and international praxis (e.g., Ross, 2002, 2006a, 2007a, 2007b) integrates (1) hierarchical complexity, (2) public issue analysis, and (3) developmentally structured discourse and deliberative decision making for the selectively co-constructive development of systemic public policy and non-policy action to address complex issues. This paradigm is operationalized in “The Integral Process for Working on Complex Issues,” (Ross, 2006a). The evolutionary theory behind this paradigm is that once we know the hierarchical complexity dynamics of evolution, we can (a) *use* the very processes of evolution to (b) *foster* evolution (c) *while and by* addressing complex issues (d) *so that* we evolve our disputes over ways of relating socially, politically, and economically which (e) constitute all complex public issues (Chilton, July 22, 2006, pers. comm.) (f) that “usurp societal space” and resources to provide developmental levels of support where it is needed. Its paradigm-based container of issue-tailored methods goes a long way toward eliminating dilemmas about how to engage all citizens to learn their perspectives.

This is an application of the paradigm of hierarchical complexity. The coordination of hierarchical complexity’s mathematical principles and humans’ evolutionary needs results in the deliberate deployment of evolutionary processes. By design, these processes support people to reflect on and thus further operationalize increases in their own stage of performances on tasks at the next orders of hierarchical complexity. One effect of its structure is akin to Sonnert’s (1994) notion of a cross-paradigmatic metadiscourse that reflects on the limits of, and modifies, its own discourse. It shares Torbert’s use of developmental action inquiry for those who inquire into their own actions to develop themselves as actors who inquire at higher stages.

The dynamic relationship that is a hallmark of the three foregoing approaches is the *while and by*. These approaches suggest that cross-paradigmatic understandings see how recursions of actions of entire entities upon themselves consequently evolve themselves—whether individuals or social entities. An ironic metaphor may be the simple moebius strip. Might this formulation be a step toward a general theory-based definition of “conscious evolution?”

IS A SOCIETY AT THE PARADIGMATIC STAGE POSSIBLE?

Looking at it from several different developmental angles, some have speculated on the theoretically viable notion of a future society performing at the paradigmatic stage. Is it a viable notion in a practical sense? The answer appears to be “No.” No, unless cross-paradigmatically designed processes and structures have been provided for paradigmatic stage actions at societal levels. These appear to require at least all of the characteristics mentioned thus far. Those fall into broad categories: (1) higher stage moral and political principles, (2) higher stage developmental discourse and decision making and other social and policy processes, (3) collectively reflecting on, evaluating, and adapting individual and social behaviors, and (4) higher stage institutional arrangements that intentionally structure efficiency, resource consumption, and societal increases in hierarchical complexity.

Let us say we, the people of Earth, saw all of that in place. What would a Paradigmatic stage 13 society do differently than present-day societies? We may surmise there would be countless different actions exhibited by individuals, groups, organizations, and governments. Some are already described in the works cited earlier. In closing, I sketch a few of my favorite ideas, not described elsewhere or worked out much beyond this stage.

1. User-friendly dynamic mappings, available at public expense, trace the behavioral relationships that comprise the complex causation of socioeconomic issues. One example is that holders of publicly traded stocks monitor and run scenarios on the effects of applying ownership pressures on corporations and view the quantification of ripple effects' impacts throughout society, including those on their own cost of living.
2. Sophisticated techniques layer and update GIS-type maps that inform and enable organically formed "issue-based politization" of society. Those who are affected by, concerned about, command resources for, and negatively contribute to an issue are the institutionalized polis to address that issue.
3. The boundary lines of geopolitical subdivisions exist for only the instantiation of functional efficiency within and among their corresponding levels, for example, local, regional, national, continental, international. Such purposes include: (a) levy taxes to fund the delivery of public services by the subdivisions; (b) elect officials of the subdivisions; and (c) ensure vertical and horizontal communications and other resource flows at needed scales throughout the world. Otherwise, geopolitical boundaries do not exist. We see people of Earth, whose identities are not defined by low-stage uses of reified imaginary boundaries.
4. As a result, we see elections of functionally-tasked officials—as compared to archaic notions of geopolitical representatives—at each successively larger social scale are conducted *without respect* to geopolitical subdivisions of the lesser scales; for example, a national-level election of officials involves a nationwide, direct popular vote with no other vote-counting boundaries *except that scale* of nation.
5. We see that political party machines are extinct, relics of the past that came before a politized world meeting its own issue-based needs without low-stage patronistic machinations.
6. *How* to increase the stage of performance of tasks of given higher orders of hierarchical complexity is common knowledge to an extent similar to knowledge that Earth is round. Thus, we see that the cultural meme of providing levels of support for the development of all—in *stage-appropriate ways*—is thoroughly embedded in Homo Sapiens.

Is a society at the paradigmatic stage possible? Do we wish to discover the answer? If so, what are we willing to invest to find out?

REFERENCES

- Commons, M. L., and Richards, F. A. (1984a). A general model of stage theory. In *Beyond formal operations: Vol. 1. Late adolescent and adult cognitive development*,

- Eds. Commons, M. L., Richards, F. A., and Armon, C., 120–40. New York: Praeger.
- , and Richards, F. A. (1984b). Applying the general stage model. In *Beyond formal operations: Vol. 1. Late adolescent and adult cognitive development*, Eds. Commons, M. L., Richards, F. A., and Armon, C., 141–57. New York: Praeger.
- , Trudeau, E. J., Stein, S. A., Richards, F. A., and Krause, S. R. (1998). The existence of developmental stages as shown by the hierarchical complexity of tasks. *Developmental Review* 8(3): 237–278.
- Chilton, S. 1988. *Defining political development*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- . 1991. *Grounding political development*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- . 2006. *In-person personal communication*. July 22, 2006. Cincinnati, OH.
- Freire, P. 2002. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Trans. Ramos, M. B., New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970.)
- Habermas, J. 1979. *Communication and the evolution of society*. Trans. McCarthy, T. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (Originally published 1976)
- . 1990. *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. Trans. Lenhardt, C., and Nicholsen, S. W., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Originally published 1983)
- Kohlberg, L., Boyd, D., and Levine, C. 1990. The return of stage 6: Its principle and moral point of view. In *The moral domain: Essays in the ongoing discussion between philosophy and the social sciences*, Ed. Wren, T. E., 151–181. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Originally published 1986)
- , Levine, C., and Hewer, A. 1983. Moral stages: A current formulation and a response to critics. *Contributions to human development* 10. Basel: S. Karger.
- , and Power, C. 1981. Moral development, religious thinking and the question of a seventh stage. In *Essays on moral development: Vol. 1. The philosophy of moral development*, Ed. Kohlberg, L., 311–72. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- , and Ryncarz, R. A. 1990. Beyond justice reasoning: Moral development and considerations of a seventh stage. In *Higher stages of human development: Perspectives on adult growth*, Eds. Alexander, C. N., and Langer, E. J., 191–207. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morrow, R. A., and Torres, C. A. 2002. *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical pedagogy and transformative social change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Power, F. C., Higgins, A., and Kohlberg, L. 1989. *Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to moral education: A study of three democratic high schools*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosenberg, S. W. 2007. Rethinking democratic deliberation: The limits and potential of citizen participation. *Polity* 39(3): 335–360.
- Ross, S. N. 2002. A developmental approach to community work on complex issues. Paper presented in *Personal and Interpersonal Factors in Development* session, Sunday, June 23 at the 17th Annual Symposium, Society for Research in Adult Development, New York, June 21–23, 2002.
- . 2006a. *The integral process for working on public issues, 4th ed.* Bethel, OH: ARINA, Inc.
- . 2006b. Perspectives on troubled interactions: What happened when a small group began to address its community's adversarial political culture. *Integral Review* 2: 139–209. Online journal available at <http://integral-review.org>.
- . 2007a. Effects of a structured public issues discourse method on the complexity of citizens' reasoning and local political development. Dissertation Abstracts International, B 68(02), UMI No. 3251492.

- . 2007a. The case for developmental methodologies in democratization. *Journal of Adult Development* 14(3–4):80–90.
- Sonnert, G. 1994. Limits of morality: A sociological approach to higher moral stages. *Journal of Adult Development* 1(2): 127–134.
- , and Commons, M. L. 1994. Society and the highest stages of moral development. *Politics and the Individual* 4(1): 31–55.
- Torbert, W. R. (1991). *The power of balance: Transforming self, society, and scientific inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- . 2000. Transforming social science: Integrating quantitative, qualitative, and action research. In *Transforming social inquiry, transforming social action: New paradigms for crossing the theory/practice divide in universities and communities*, Eds. Sherman, F. T., and Torbert, W. R., 67–91. Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic.
- , and Associates. 2004. *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Winterstein, S. K. 2005. Cognition and communication: A theory of discourse structures. *Dissertation Abstracts International* 66 (01A), 332. (UMI No. 3160713)