



Transformation Research and Academic Responsibility

The social theory gap in narratives of radical change

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Ingolfur Blühdorn / Felix Butzlaff / Michael Deflorian / Daniel Hausknost

Abstract

Parts of the transformation literature seem strangely disconnected from the sociological analysis of contemporary capitalist societies. Starting out from this diagnosis of a social theory deficit and guided by the distinction of three levels of transformation proposed by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), the present article first deals with a niche player – the degrowth movement – to which considerable expectations regarding its transformative potential are linked. Next, it widens the perspective to the societal mainstream and explores how, in only marginally growing economies, exclusionary and illiberal populist movements, rather than sustainability-oriented values, have become the determining force. Finally, the focus is on the capabilities of the democratic state, which is usually expected to adopt a vital role in the transformation to sustainability. Overall, the investigation into transformative capacities at these three levels leads to a rather sceptical assessment of the ability and willingness of modern consumer societies to achieve sustainability. We therefore argue that the social science branch of the transformation debate ought to take more care in putting their transformation-related diagnoses, recommendations and strategies on proper social-theoretical foundations.

keywords: sustained unsustainability; socio-ecological transformation; post-growth movement; societal value change; environmental state

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1. Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States rendered more evident than ever what had already emerged during the 2009 UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen: the end of an internationally coordinated and cooperative policy for one bio-physical world, one climate, and one global society. Trump's "America First!" has replaced these ideas with a clear commitment to the logic of growth, the primacy of national interests, and the unconditional prioritisation of the economy over social justice, climate protection and ecology. This politics of unsustainability (Blüh-dorn 2011, 2013a, 2016), which at least in the US now appears to have been given official status, is of course neither specifically American, nor fundamentally new. In the German-language literature the phenomenon is discussed, inter alia, as the *imperial mode of living* (Brand & Wissen 2018) of the *externalisation societies* (Lessenich 2016) in the global North. At the same time, however, major effort is being invested in constructing new narratives of hope. While older promises of ecological modernisation seem to be losing some of their plausibility, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, for example, which came into force in 2015, are accorded considerable importance. Especially in the German-speaking world, this also applies to the influential Great Transformation scenario of the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU 2011). According to the WBGU, a sustainability-oriented shift in social value preferences can already be observed. Pioneers of change at society's grassroots, in conjunction with a proactive state and transformative science, have already initiated the transition to a sustainable society (see also e.g. Paech 2013; Schneidewind 2015; Wagner & Grunwald 2015).

As yet, the discrepancy between such narratives of hope and the reality of the politics of unsustainability has received surprisingly little academic attention, even though the supposedly self-critical externalisation societies have, both internally and externally, already developed into aggressive exclusion societies. Right-wing populist movements and protectionist

governments rally with fierce determination in favour of clear boundaries between those who *really need* help and those who *only want to gain undeserved advantages*. And strikingly, the behaviour of Donald Trump only reaffirms the call of political leaders in Europe for even more solidarity in the fight for *our values, our freedom, and our way of life*. Admittedly, the latter have long been recognized as impossible to generalise, as imperial and as socially, politically and ecologically destructive; yet, they must still be defended at any price. Thus, there is a glaring contradiction between the societal transformation, which sustainability research and many political actors are urgently calling for – and which, according to some, is already recognizable – and the transformation which is actually taking place. Significant parts of the transformation literature therefore seem strangely disconnected from the sociological

A crucial societal responsibility of the social sciences is to examine popular transformation narratives for their sociological plausibility.

analysis of contemporary capitalist societies.

In our endeavour to draw attention

to this socio-theoretical deficit, we deliberately do not pursue the (fully legitimate) elite-critical analysis of power relations that effectively block any transformation to sustainability. Instead, we investigate how *sustained unsustainability* is deeply rooted in society at large. Based on the WBGU's proposed differentiation of various levels of transformative action (WBGU 2011), we first address a niche player, the degrowth movement, and examine to what extent the high expectations commonly placed on this movement as a pioneer of change are actually justified. Then, we explore how in societies whose economies grow, despite considerable efforts, only moderately, illiberal populist movements have emerged as the primary force determining political debates in the societal mainstream – a trend which is exactly contrary to the assertion of an imminent change in values towards sustainability. In section four, we critically examine the possibilities and limitations of the democratically legitimized state, which is generally given a central role in sustainability transformation.

Overall, our call for a more careful, socio-theoretical foundation in the transformation debate is based on our commitment to the societal responsibility of sustainability research. As regards our understanding of this responsibility,

Popular transformation narratives can actually have a stabilising – rather than transformative – effect on the status quo of sustained unsustainability and would then, in fact, appear as irresponsible counter-

ity, we reject the WBGU concept of *transformative research* that is expected to develop ‘relevant and credible solutions for the identified problems’ (WBGU

2011: 322); for it cannot be the task of social science to put itself at the service of agendas whose origins and designs are apparently no longer up for discussion. However, believing in a sociology that critically reflects on the standards and practices of its own critique (Boltanski 2010), we do see the social sciences as having an essential social responsibility, indeed: to thoroughly examine popular transformation narratives for their sociological plausibility. For, at times, such narratives can – quite contrary to their originators’ ambitions – actually have a stabilising, rather than transformative, effect on the status quo of sustained unsustainability. From an eco-political perspective, they would then, in fact, appear as irresponsible.

2. Pioneers of the post-growth society?

Degrowth is one of the central guiding ideas in the debate on the socio-ecological transformation. As an eco-political strategy, it is a critical counter position to the concepts of *green growth* and *ecological modernisation* (Jackson 2011; Paech 2012). The degrowth movement is often described as an important collective actor driving structural change towards sustainability (Demaria et al. 2013; D’Alisa et al. 2015). Given the obvious symptoms of crisis in the Western economic model as a whole (Streeck 2014), it takes a critical view of capitalism (Kallis et al. 2015: 11). Placing much emphasis on

alternative and subversive practices, it responds to the widely-felt desire to take immediate, personal and meaningful action, e.g. in food cooperatives, borrowing shops, alternative footwear workshops and a variety of other experimental projects. Not least because of this diversity, degrowth is regarded as a space for debate and action in which a mosaic of alternatives for socio-ecological transformation evolves (Burkhart et al. 2017). The degrowth idea takes its starting point from the recognition that infinite economic growth on a finite planet is impossible. Degrowth thinkers believe that the 21st century will see a degrowing or collapsing world economy, and that contemporary societies ought to prepare for the societal turbulence this will entail. For them, the inescapable degrowth to come presents an opportunity to construct a new type of society: post-growth, post-fossil and post-capitalist. Indeed, degrowth economists have developed models showing that a relatively prosperous and equitable steady-state economy would, in principle, be feasible (Victor 2008; Jackson 2009; Langen 2017).

However, the institutional, socio-cultural and political feasibility of a biophysically stable economy has neither been proven nor tested. After all, the history of modernity has been a history of biophysical expansion. From an analytical point of view, then, material degrowth may be a necessity, but from a political point of view, a peaceful, stable and equitable post-growth society may well be impossible. This glaring gap between the necessity and impossibility of degrowth is what characterises this heterogeneous movement and what often makes its normative concepts and demands look naïve, implausible, paternalistic and factually depoliticising.

Further pursuing this critical reflection, one central motif of the degrowth movement and the related social science literature is to critique and eventually overcome the everyday practice of consumerism. The patterns of consumer behaviour in modern societies are not considered as rooted in genuine human needs, but rather the expression of interests imposed on individuals in order to ‘preserve prevailing

social conditions'¹ (Muraca 2015: 109). Being the perpetual target of the consumer goods industry and being continuously pressured by the competition for social distinction, *alienated* citizens are said to be locked into an 'iron cage of consumerism' (Jackson 2009: 87-102). Because they are 'prisoners of the growth regime' (Muraca 2015: *ibid.*), they are said to be unable to ever achieve their desired happiness. Yet, critical reflection on these alienated patterns of behaviour is assumed to open the door to alternative practices, rendering it possible to change one's self and, ultimately, society as a whole (Eversberg & Schmelzer 2016: 13).

This narrative is reminiscent of the social movement literature of the 1970s and 1980s as well as the diagnoses of Marcusean critical theory. Yet, from today's perspective, it raises doubts, both theoretically and empirically. Undeniably, there are signals in contemporary societies of discomfort with consumerism, nurtured not least by the destructive social and ecological consequences of consumer culture. From a sociological perspective, however, the attempt to present this culture as primarily determined by imposed interests, as pathological, or even as a deliberately instituted programme of stultification seems rather simplistic. Instead, to the same extent that *image*-construction and external self-presentation take priority over traditional notions of *character* and inner values, consumer practices are becoming the central means of building and articulating individuality (Bauman 2007; Blühdorn 2013b; Ritzer & Murphy 2014). And the fact that this kind of constructed self is always ephemeral and requires constant renewal, is by no means just a deficit but actually provides the opportunity to articulate – in the *society of singularities* (Reckwitz 2017) – flexible, multi-layered and contradictory identities. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that members of the degrowth community do by no means fully liberate themselves from the central symbols of modern lifestyles: smartphone ownership or regular air travel are widespread in these communities, too (Eversberg 2016: 93).

Deviations from established patterns of consumption often remain highly selective and symbolic.

Such practices may be perceived as *irritating*, but they retain a central function in terms of identity construction. Therefore, from a sociological point of view, the assertion that the consumer culture is a 'mega-policy of individual atrophy' (Paech 2013: 205) is not tenable. And given the prevailing ideals of a good and fulfilling life, the reverse assertion that liberation from imposed consumerism opens the door to *true* fulfilment and the realisation of the *authentic* self is not very plausible either.

Secondly, the proposition that the degrowth movement is being regarded as an avant-garde of the structural transformation of society is

based on its focus on everyday life and the experimental implementation of alternative models (Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie 2017: 47), such as community gardens, open workshops, or housing projects. Participants in so-called 'real laboratories of change' (Welzer et al. 2014), so the argument runs, not only experience a liberation from the pathologies of imposed consumerism, but also advance actual, socio-ecological transformation (Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie 2017: 14). Ultimately, it is, supposedly, the radically new experience of individual autonomy that motivates practitioners to pursue self-transformation in other areas of life as well (Muraca 2015: 107f). Particularly in urban areas, this *everyday environmentalism* is regarded as a promising strategy to overcome the contradiction between the actual value orientations of individuals and the current hegemonic logic of industrialist consumer capitalism (Schlosberg & Coles 2015).

Once again, substantial doubts seem to be justified. It is true that, in the critical-creative milieu, in particular, there is an interest in more sustainable practices and social forms of life, which go beyond capitalist mass consumption. Prominent examples include local community gardens and organic vegetable cooperatives. However, such deviations from established patterns of consumption and behaviour often remain highly selective and symbolic. Even at

¹ To improve accessibility, all direct quotations from German-language publications have been translated into English.

the level of individuals, there is little evidence that the experience of self-efficacy acquired in these small, alternative contexts would initiate a profound transformation in behaviour and thought patterns. Instead, empirical studies of political consumption as well as urban farming reveal significant and lasting contradictions in everyday life (Connolly & Prothero 2005; Dobernig & Stagl 2015). Studies comparing the environmental behaviour of various social milieus come to the conclusion that especially in the critical-creative milieus, lifestyles are clearly above the average consumption level with regards to material resources and energy (e.g. Umweltbundesamt 2016; Moser & Kleinhüchelkotten 2017). And the assertion (Howaldt & Schwartz 2017) that structural societal change towards sustainability will occur because new social practices spread *through imitation* (Tarde 2009) and because they 'are better able to solve or satisfy specific problems or needs' (Howaldt & Schwarz 2010: 54) appears stunningly simplistic.

Thirdly, trust in the pioneering power of the degrowth movement is based on the hypothesis that it presents an integrating central idea acting as an umbrella for 'different groups, forms of resistance, social conflicts and alternative social concepts' (Muraca 2015: 105). This view is controversial, though, even within the movement itself (Burkhart et al. 2016). In fact, a myriad of different ideological orientations are found among degrowth sympathisers (Eversberg 2016). Some of the widely shared positions are the belief in grass-roots democracy (Hausknost 2017a) or the assumption that a degrowth democracy will secure the integrity and autonomy of nature and future generations. Yet, the hope that degrowth might function as a new bracket for diverse emancipatory movements is countered by the fact that the term remains, at least for the time being, chronically vague in substance. On the one hand, its openness is viewed as a strength because it offers space for a multitude of ideas and courses of action (D'Alisa et al. 2015: xxi; Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie 2017: 49). But even within the movement's own ranks, there is not much consensus regarding collective rules for the central demand of *doing with less*.

This is hardly surprising, since it is difficult, if not impossible, to launch an alternative socio-economic order from below and within the overwhelming dynamics of the incumbent capitalist model. Efforts to plant the seeds of change in community gardens and repair cafés are much more likely to be absorbed or ignored by the established order than posing a serious challenge to it. As the degrowth movement has no well-developed concept of power but seems to champion the deliberate absence of power, it is dependent on individualised, morally motivated action in small groups. It thus has the tendency to happily retreat into private sufficiency and to the field of material practice rather than engaging in political organisation and strategic action. This is consistent with the logic of progressive individualisation and differentiation, and points to the possible absorption and dispersal of the movement as just another private lifestyle choice within the neoliberal universe. Even more so, degrowth is failing to create a normative basis for a transformative project at the societal or even international level.

Hence, degrowth so far does not offer a suitable substitute for earlier socio-ecological utopias, i.e. it does not provide an operational normative principle for a great societal transformation. A clear vision as regards the form of political organisation which might render a degrowth society a practically viable alternative is still lacking. As it is, the movement may, in a sense, actually offer spaces in which identification with the socio-critical and emancipatory project can be articulated, without having to commit to any particular values, behaviours or personal restrictions. Thus, the discursive critique of growth and consumerism and the practical experience of micro-alternatives may, in fact, serve individuals and society at large to cope with their cognitive dissonance and to hold on to the imperial mode of living. Functioning as a compensation strategy, degrowth narratives might, thus, even strengthen the *resilience* of crisis-stricken capitalism (Blühdorn 2017). This consideration seems all the more relevant as the degrowth narrative largely neglects the fact that, beyond its own niches, a completely different post-growth reality has begun to evolve.

3. The reality of the exclusion society

In the transformation literature, the post-growth society figures as a normative ideal and guiding principle which assumes that, alongside the new society, a new kind of human being will emerge with entirely different ideas of self-determination, success and happiness (Soper 2007). But along the way a de facto post-growth society has emerged in industrial countries that has little in common with such movement ideals: The growth-dependent promises and hopes of traditional modernisation remain fully intact, but for major segments of society, they remain forever unattainable because economic growth rates are moderate, at best, and unlikely to return to earlier levels. These societies are indeed experiencing fundamental changes adding up to a significant shift of values and culture – but whether this is beneficial to the envisaged sustainability transformation seems rather questionable. It is useful, therefore, to further pursue some points, which have already come up in the above discussion of the degrowth movement as a niche-actor, and explore them in more detail with a view to the societal mainstream.

Most pertinent here is the question of the availability and social acceptance of socio-ecological imperatives or behavioural rules that could guide the project of a great transformation. Very important in this context is the significant decline in the willingness of today's citizens to lastingly assign and commit themselves to any particular social milieu or even political grouping. Membership numbers of political parties, trade unions or churches have been in decline for many years (Wiesendahl 2011). At the same time, however, the number of those trying to feed their individualised concerns into politics in ad hoc campaign networks is increasing (Butzlaff 2016). Processes of individualisation and emancipation have disembedded people from traditional social contexts, causing them to develop their notions and strategies of self-realisation in an increasingly individualised and flexible way. On the one hand, this means liberation from old, patronizing roles; at the same time, however, this

emancipation also limits the possibility to initiate collective action and new forms of subjectivation via group contexts – which would, most probably, be a prerequisite for any sustainability-oriented social transformation.

Further aggravating this problem, the pressure towards individual self-responsibility and the necessity to rely on one's personal abilities and resources for purposes of identity formation and self-realisation, gives rise to new efforts of second-order emancipation (Blühdorn 2013b: 143-150): Individuals who are ever less firmly embedded into societal contexts that predetermine their identity and way of life are increasingly sceptical of the very norms and commitments which the emancipatory movements of the 1970s and 1980s had once been campaigning for. After all, it seems that for large parts of the population in advanced democracies, the further democratisation of society, commitment to the common good, ecologically sustainable forms of life or the ideal of international justice are not automatically desirable. Hence, the beliefs and demands of earlier phases of emancipation are themselves being put to a critical test. This has caused, inter alia, an irritating ambivalence towards democratic values and procedures (Butzlaff et al. 2013; Blühdorn 2013b; Blühdorn & Butzlaff 2018). Equally, significant parts of the population do not necessarily share moral imperatives of ecological behaviour and post-material ideas of happiness, but perceive them as restrictive and patronising. The widespread description of Green parties as prohibitionist provides clear evidence.

Right-wing populist movements propel the dissolution of the social, democratic and ecological commitments, which earlier emancipatory movements had secured in arduous struggles.

This is directly linked to the aforementioned observation that in modern societies the importance of consumer-oriented forms of self-realization and social distinction is not declining, but rather continues to increase. And inadvertently, the emancipatory movements have themselves actually fostered this development. They have always regarded individual

self-realization as a strength, but disregarded the fact that their ideal of the liberated, self-responsible Self requires a high degree of social, cognitive and cultural capital (Sennet 1999). Such capital, however, is not available to significant parts of society. Thus, the individualisation of self-realisation on the one hand, and the unequal distribution of such forms of capital on the other, have nurtured, across all sections of society, a strong emphasis on the materialist dimension – which, in turn, is highly problematic as regards the transformation project: Consumerism, supported by the low price strategy of discount retailers is accessible for lower income groups, and has increasingly become the main arena in which individual identity is developed and displayed (Böhme 2016).

Yet, under the conditions of a de facto post-growth society, this consumerist mode of self-realisation comes under severe pressure (Graefe 2016). As economic growth is at best moderate, major parts of society do not command the resources required for the flexible and fluid forms of consumption-based identity construction. Welfare-state institutions are no longer in a position to fill the gap that arises, but are themselves being restructured or dismantled under the auspices of neo-liberal austerity policies. In this way, new lines of social division emerge between those who are able to constructively use the new freedom and opportunities because they are well equipped with the necessary forms of capital, and those sections of society that can realize the promises of social liberalisation only to a limited extent or not at all. Thus, the identities and lifestyles of some parts of society are no longer just based on the externalisation of social and ecological costs in an international or global sense, but they depend, more directly than ever, on the exclusion of others within society. What until recently seemed to be an unpleasant but treatable side-effect is transformed into a necessary condition: some can realize their ideals because others are barred from doing so (Lessenich 2016).

Essentially, the state is expected to deliver an environmental policy that improves the quality of life, but not a transformation policy that challenges and aims to redefine individual lifestyles and the common good.

A direct consequence of these developments, which can be observed in many Western societies, is the rise of right-wing populist movements. They draw their political strength from the taxing demands of neo-liberal modernisation imposed on the individual (Spier 2010; Inglehart & Norris 2017), and from the structural challenges that the emancipatory-liberal project entails for essential parts of society (Eribon 2016). In this way, right-wing populism has long since moved from the margins into the very mainstream of socio-political debate and has become a determining political force (Mudde 2013; Decker et al. 2016). Its agenda, however, is in direct contradiction to the hopes of transformation narratives: it propels the dissolution of the social, democratic and ecological commitments that emancipatory movements had arduously established. Right-wing populism defines politics and society as a rivalry for scarce cultural, social and economic resources, which corrupt elites and parasitic free riders are taking away from those who legitimately claim them. And arguing that the much-debated socio-ecological transformation is no more than an elitist project that essentially cements the privileged status of those who have already benefited from recent societal modernisation (Geiges et al. 2015; Berbuir et al. 2015; Oliver & Rahn 2016), right-wing populists are resolutely opposed to all demands of a sustainability-oriented policy.

Instead, they pursue an agenda of social exclusion, resist forms of democracy which safeguard minorities and limit the promise of equality and justice to what they see as the *real people* (Blühdorn & Butzlaff 2018).

Hence, just as the power of the degrowth movement as a niche

player of comprehensive societal change is marginal at best, the mainstream of Western societies is, as regards its value preferences and ongoing culture shifts, not well positioned for any socio-ecological transformation either. And if significant transformative potential can be found neither among niche players nor in the mainstream of the 'threatened majority' (Krstev 2017: 67), eco-political hopes will invariably focus on the leadership of the proactive environmental state.

4. Democratic consensus and the proactive state

Against the backdrop of increasing societal complexity and the differentiation of diverse value systems, a “proactive and enabling state” (WBGU 2011) is, indeed, being called upon today more than ever to foster a societal transformation towards sustainability. This environmental state is expected to establish “an effective set of legal instruments supported by an appropriate policy mix involving private sector, public-private and public actors” and to create “suitable spaces at various levels available for experimentation and ensure leeway” (WBGU 2011: 205). It is thus assigned a crucial role in any societal transformation. In the context of neo-liberal hegemony, however, this role is interpreted above all as giving further support to well-established structures and strategies: strengthening the dynamics of the market, public-private partnerships and a policy mix that interprets societal change primarily as technological and social innovation. Instead of enforcing a radical change and challenging a societal status quo by means of regulatory and fiscal measures that actively intervene in the supply and demand of material goods, the burden of transformation is transferred to so-called change agents and social entrepreneurs, whose innovative ideas are expected to facilitate societal value change from the depths of civil society and start-up niches, as discussed above. From a neo-liberal perspective, in particular, the state is expected (or willed) to induce a sustainable society future, but at the same time refrains from

Paradoxically, it is precisely the undeniable success of institutionalised environmental policy that proves the inability to create an original imperative on which a proactive state might base any project of structural transformation.

assuming any direct responsibility for its establishment. This creates a dilemma: on the one hand, confronted with overwhelming scientific evidence, the state must commit itself to the goal of a radical socio-ecological structural change; on the other hand, especially in the age of hegemonic neo-liberalism, it cannot allow for a transformation that endangers the performance of established indicators of progress,

such as economic growth, competitiveness or rates of investment.

This dilemma does not, however, arise solely from the hegemony of neo-liberalism, but first and foremost from the liberal state’s dependence on democratic legitimation procedures. Since the rise of the working class and recognition of its claim for political and economic participation and equality, the modern state has also become a democratic state. In order to be able to offer a credible promise of prosperity and progress to the population at large and to pacify ideological resistance against the dominant logic of capital accumulation, it must ensure that the material base (employment, income, welfare benefits) grows at an ever-increasing rate. Thus, the modern state is subject to a twofold legitimation imperative (Dryzek et al. 2003): to ensure both political and economic participation. This way, economic growth ultimately has become a key state imperative (Skocpol 1979). Some theorists argue that in modern societies, beyond the traditional legitimation imperative, a genuine sustainability imperative may develop, or even that this is already taking place (Dryzek et al. 2003; Meadowcroft 2012). The inclusion of environmental movements and their core interests into public policy norms, they suggest, has institutionalised environmental protection as a new central concern of the state, which has developed beyond a traditional welfare state into a modern

environmental state. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the undeniable success of institutionalised environmental policy that proves the inability to create an original imperative on which a proactive state might base any project of structural transformation.

This is, firstly, because contemporary environmental policy clearly follows the legitimacy imperative of the state and sidesteps prioritizing an independent sustainability imperative. For example, policies protecting rivers and forests, improving the air quality in metropolitan areas and establishing nature reserves fit seamlessly into the welfare state logic of securing and improving the general standard of living (Hausknot 2017b). Secondly, in the past these

improvements of a common living standard had specifically been achieved without questioning the established path dependencies of industrial development and economic expansion. Improving living conditions at large further refined and entrenched the neo-liberal logic and hegemony (Fücks 2013; Huber 2009). Yet, it is precisely this reconciliation with the welfare state on the one hand and the imperative of economic growth on the other, which deprives environmental policy of its genuine political and transformational potential. This reconciliation reduces every effort towards a comprehensive, anticipatory sustainability to a mere ethical postulate; it turns a structural transformation into a scientific, elitist and detached pipe dream that remains unconnected to any societal reality.

In contrast, a proactive state that aims to extend beyond the democratic and welfare state legitimacy imperative would have to actively intervene in production operations and the dominant consumer logic. It would need to reassess and politicise key questions of welfare, the meaning of what counts as a good life and of the role of society. For a long time, the societal conflicts surrounding these notoriously problematic issues had been silenced – de-politicised (Hausknost 2014) – by the promise of ever-lasting economic growth and continuous improvement of living standards. However, as outlined in the previous section, in de facto post-growth societies these questions are vehemently re-emerging. And under conditions of intensified competition, austerity and exclusion, state policies which, in the name of sustainability or other collective goals, intervene in private lives, trigger, more predictably than ever, political conflicts that can hardly be controlled. For example, any attempt to limit meat consumption or interfere with individual patterns of mobility is immediately rejected as elitist and authoritarian. So, essentially, the state is expected to deliver an environmental policy that improves the quality of life (e.g. by supporting the provision of healthy vegetables, efficient engines and regional noise protection measures), but not a transformation policy that

With their narrative of technological innovation, market-based policy instruments and politically active consumers, the advocates of ecological modernisation established an effective protection shield under which the visibly fragile edifice of liberal consumer capitalism could be sustained for several more decades.

aims to challenge and redefine individual lifestyles and the common good.

The transformation possibilities of a state that is dependent on representative democratic legitimacy are therefore greatly limited. In the absence of alternative criteria that are able to gather the support of a societal majority, the legitimacy imperative of the modern democratic state remains the glass ceiling of any state-organized transformation. Any attempt to undermine the logic of economic growth and consumption would therefore inevitably lead

to a legitimacy crisis of the state (Hausknost 2017b). Against the backdrop of climate change, the depletion of resources, escalating social inequalities and the crisis of capitalism, contemporary public policy is, of course, under increasing pressure to find possibilities for re-stabilisation beyond the paradigm of economic growth. Yet, if any such reorientation would really lead to sustainability, and to

what extent the state would really be able to steer and shape this transformation process, remains unpredictable. It is, however, evident that the dissolution of conventional stabilisation mechanisms can already be observed.

5. Between rhetoric of departure and the lack of alternatives

Thus, contemporary post-industrial consumer democracies are indeed undergoing fundamental change. But the transformation processes that can factually be observed are far from what sustainability research and many actors advocating sustainability transformation policies demand. For the time being, the popular transformation literature offers very little to address this discrepancy. The widespread calls of a revitalisation of the democratic project, a genuine self-realisation through alternative hedonism, a new social contract, or the vision of a good life for all are well-intended, politically. From a sociological point of view, however, they give the impression of helplessness and being curiously detached from the prevalent

societal reality – not least because of their blatant socio-theoretical deficits. Although the current literature does, occasionally, acknowledge the contradictory simultaneity of an increasing awareness of the sustainability issue and the resolute adherence to the imperial mode of living and the logic of externalisation, current research on sustainability transformation consistently avoids addressing the actual problem:

This is that the politics of unsustainability is not simply the result of an evil and alienating capitalism, but rather – or, at the very least, also – has emerged from the emancipatory project itself. Unsurprisingly, therefore, sustainability research and its political actors are finding it ever more difficult to plausibly portray sustained unsustainability as the result of alienated or false consciousness and to address it with promises of a truly liberating and emancipatory alternative. The crux of modern sustainability policy lies exactly in the harmony of the two logics of capitalism and the emancipatory project. Yet, significant parts of the transformation literature determinedly refuse to acknowledge this new consonance – not least, presumably, because of the political abyss that it opens up. Nevertheless, the principle of academic societal responsibility demands that these new socio-cultural conditions are addressed in a sociologically plausible manner.

Of course, sustainability research and transformation efforts which aim at a fundamental structural change of modern societies cannot adopt established societal logics, values, and procedures as criteria and as limits to their imagination. At the same time, though, transformation narratives, which lack an adequate foundation in social theory, run the risk of inadvertently stabilising the established politics of unsustainability. Already in the 1980s, advocates of ecological modernisation had asserted that the problem of sustainability and resource over-use and pollution was now clearly acknowledged, that politics was taking it seriously and that it would now be dealt with constructively at all levels of society. With their

narrative of technological innovation, market-based policy instruments, and politically active consumers, the advocates of ecological modernisation thus established an effective protection shield under which the – already at the time – visibly fragile edifice of liberal consumer capitalism could be sustained for several more decades. Their policies have, undoubtedly, brought about a number of improvements. Yet, they have also helped to provide the time and space for the sustainability crisis to unfold the full complexity that today's societies now have to confront. As the multiple limits – economic, ecological, social, migration etc. – of the established strategies of further sustaining the unsustainable now have become more visible than ever before, and the Polanyian notion of the great transformation is again coming to the forefront of the discussion, it is, therefore, all the more important that new and emerging narratives of hope are more carefully examined for their actual transformative potential.

The questions of whether and to what extent such meta-critical approaches may mobilise new political energy, for the time being, have to remain unanswered. Admittedly, our analysis above understands societal development much more strongly as evolutionary and less controllable than approaches following the tradition of post-Marxist critical theory

If it wants to be sociologically plausible and socially responsible, transformation research will eventually have to acknowledge that the old paradigm of alienation and emancipation is simply no longer sufficient.

do, or the optimistic transformation narratives of the WBGU. Also, our arguments might be criticised for neglecting societal power relations and not formulating constructive policy recommendations. Models such as the theory of second-order emancipation might even be maliciously taken as a social-theoretical legitimation for the perpetuation of the neo-liberal status quo. Our objective here, however, is not to challenge the approaches that focus on power-relations, but to supplement them in order to facilitate a more complex understanding of sustained unsustainability. If it wants to be sociologically plausible and socially responsible, transformation research will eventually have to acknowledge that the old paradigm of alienation and emancipation is simply no longer sufficient to explain advanced modern societies and their crises. And in any case, our

argument does not light-heartedly abandon the norms of the critical project. Quite the contrary, our attempt to understand the logic and implications of the prevailing politics of unsustainability is, ultimately, motivated (even when reflexively criticising new and emerging narratives of hope!) by precisely those norms which second-order emancipation comprehensively remoulds. And if some all-too-simple transformation narratives are critically questioned here, this neither implies any assertion of a lack of alternatives to, nor any justification for, the

societal status quo: climate change, migration waves, right-wing populism, religious fundamentalism and terrorism clearly show that the politics of unsustainability is already mobilising considerable political energies. Yet, realistically, the hope and belief that these energies can once again be channelled and controlled in the spirit of the old European project of rationality, enlightenment and democratisation today seems increasingly questionable.



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