

Transition Impossible?

Ambiguous Transformations and the Resilience of Unsustainability

International Research Workshop
19-21 September, 2018

Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN)
Vienna University of Economics and Business

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This international research workshop is concerned with theorising, explaining and interpreting the ambiguous transformations characterising contemporary consumer democracies: On the one hand, there is a widely articulated demand for a profound *socio-ecological transformation*, also referred to as *sustainability transition*, which is hoped to redeem modernity from its inherently unsustainable relationship with nature. On the other hand, there seems to be little evidence of any such transformation taking place. Instead, a different set of transformations seems to occur in Western societies: a transformation of modern democracy towards a more authoritarian and exclusive model of popular government; a transformation of social values towards individual responsibility, intensifying consumption and social exclusion; and indeed a dissolution of the markers of eco-political certainty, which characterises the onset of the age of the *Anthropocene*. Overall, contemporary societal transformations seem to further entrench rather than reconfigure the unsustainable structures of modernity. The resilience of socioeconomic unsustainability is perhaps the most remarkable phenomenon today.

Further pursuing the established research agenda of the IGN, this two-and-a-half-day expert workshop will explore the relationship of the divergent, ambiguous and inconsistent transformations in contemporary capitalist democracies. It will try to identify causal links and mechanisms and to attain a better understanding of transformative dynamics. How can contemporary transformations be conceptualised? How can they be influenced? What are the links between transformations in social values, democratic systems and material structures? Which are the forces and who are the actors involved in transformative dynamics? What are the unintended effects of transformative agency? What is the role of the capitalist democratic state?

To allow for intensive discussion, the number of participants is restricted. Some of the attendees will contribute by invitation. This call for papers addresses itself to scholars from all academic subject disciplines who are engaged in original and innovative work on the topic. Full draft papers need to be submitted and will be circulated in advance. Revised papers will be published with a major University Press and/or as special issues of international journals. Participants are expected to attend the full workshop. There is no conference fee.

Beyond Established Truths

The workshop explicitly aims to venture into new intellectual territories by challenging established narratives about *business as usual* and *great ecological transformations*. In doing so, it continues the work of the ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop *Beyond the Environmental State? Exploring the Political Prospects of a Sustainability Transformation* (Nottingham, April 2017) and of the international expert workshop *Activation – Self-Management – Overload: Political Participation beyond the Post-democratic Turn* that was hosted by the IGN in September 2017. The results of both workshops are currently being published in various special issues of international academic journals.

We invite conceptual papers and theoretically informed empirical studies under three main headings:

A) Conceptualising Transformations

With a view to the expected ecological, economic and social perturbations of the 21st century, it has become commonplace to call for a comprehensive societal transformation towards sustainability. But what could a *descriptive-analytical* conception of societal transformation look like? What does transformation actually *mean*? How can we conceptually distinguish different types, forms and dynamics of transformation and/or transition?

B) Democracy and the Dialectics of Emancipation

Contemporary transformations reflexively challenge the deeply entrenched notions of democracy and emancipation. In what ways can observed trends towards more authoritarian modes of government and new understandings of emancipation be explained and interpreted? How are notions of progressiveness and regressiveness being reframed? What are the drivers of observed value changes and how do they relate to material and structural conditions? In consideration of these developments, what would be the conditions of possibility of a normatively sustainable model of democracy?

C) The State as Actor and Structural Constraint

How can the role of the capitalist democratic state be conceptualised in both intended and actually occurring transformations? To what extent is the state a transformative factor or an inhibitor of transformation? What is the role of state power and private power in steering or blocking transformative dynamics? What is the relation between political objectives and unintended dynamics of transformation?

Schedule for submitting abstracts (350 words) and full draft papers (6.000 words):

Deadline for abstracts: **28 February 2018**

Notification of acceptance: **15 March 2018**

Deadline for full draft papers: **20 August 2018**

Please send your abstracts to: michael.deflorian@wu.ac.at

Limited travel/accommodation support might be available.