

The Great Transformation: On the Future of Modern Societies

Concluding Conference of the German Research Foundation-funded research team 'Landnahme, Acceleration, Activation. On the (De-)Stabilisation of Modern Growth Societies' and the Second Regional Conference of the German Sociological Association / Jena, 23–27 September 2019

The German Sociological Association's 2008 Congress in Jena was titled 'Uncertain Times' (*Unsichere Zeiten*). A decade later, times have not become any more certain in the least. It did not take the global economy long to recover to a growth course after the global financial and economic crisis of 2007 to 2009, and Germany in particular is experiencing an ongoing rise in prosperity, declining unemployment, record employment figures and growing tax revenues. However, internal societal divisions and polarisation are unmistakably – and seemingly paradoxically – increasing. An understanding that things cannot remain the way they are has become commonplace even among social elites. There is some reason to believe that the early industrialised countries will undergo a 'Great Transformation' (Karl Polanyi), a period of profound change, most likely including the abandonment of dominant growth patterns, forms of production, and lifestyle that have been maintained over decades. But where should the journey take us and who is to set its course? These and other questions shall guide the double conference taking place in Jena from 23–27 September 2019. The concluding conference of the Jena-based DFG-funded research team 'Landnahme, Acceleration, Activation. On the (De-)Stabilisation of Modern Growth Societies' will be integrated into the German Sociological Association's Regional Conference.

The Great Transformation and New Challenges facing Society

The conference's title proceeds from Karl Polanyi's diagnosis of a Great Transformation and applies it, with all due caution, to the more recent past, the present, and future. The notion of a large-scale transformation serves many social scientists, but also parts of the political elites and their think tanks, as a concept to describe ongoing changes and ruptures (Nancy, Fraser, Michael Burawoy, among others). Even when unconnected to Polanyi's social diagnosis, the notion of transformation has come to shape social discourses, such as, for example, in the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals. As will be familiar to many, Karl Polanyi interpreted the development of the early industrialised countries as a double movement. Driven by the ideological leitmotif of a purely market-based society, fictitious commodities such as labour, land and money were treated by competitive liberal capitalism as if they were just another good. This movement caused additional 'disembedding', namely the separation of markets from their social contexts, which in turn provoked counter-movements, ultimately leading to German and European fascism. From this perspective, transformation represents an ambiguous concept: it addresses a long-lasting fundamental change, which need not necessarily lead to the betterment of societies, but may in fact result in authoritarian forms of rule.

History does not repeat itself. That said, certain parallels with the present cannot be denied. Since the 1980s, the period of 'intensified globalisation' (Anthony Giddens), originally a response to

tendencies towards stagnation in the early industrialised countries, engendered a world largely interconnected through markets, international trade, production and – albeit often ignored – international care chains. Sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, politicians like Tony Blair and many others saw globalisation as a long ride with an uncontrollable juggernaut. The – primarily economic – process of globalisation appeared to them as inescapable factual constraint. Whoever failed to adapt ran the risk of being smothered. At least since the global financial and economic crisis, these views and interpretations have begun to change. Globalisation has grown ‘repulsive’, producing a blowback, that is to say unwanted consequences which rebound back onto the causal centres in the wealthy North, causing change there as well. Some important critical aspects of this transformation currently being debated include:

- relatively low economic growth rates in the old industrial societies, contrasted by the dynamic of high-growth societies (China, India) which are catching up;
- growing inequality within most national societies, alongside a simultaneous decrease in inequalities between the countries of the North and South;
- the proliferation of precarious forms of work and life (hitherto known only to exist in countries of the global South) via transnational care chains and thus in the wealthy North;
- increasing political addressing of and reaction to this precarisation, at times identified as a structural crisis in the care sector – with its concrete local specificity and corresponding efforts at reform or solution;
- the dismantling and realignment of (welfare) state structures especially in the global North, a process which in parts appears to exhibit – say, compared to Latin America – a delayed dynamic of catching up and may produce socially, politically and ecologically destructive effects;
- cumulating ecological threats which go beyond or threaten to overwhelm the limits of planetary tolerance;
- growing refugee and migration movements, the forefront of which is now reaching the capitalist centres, forcing the latter to address global and transnational dynamics. European societies are forced to accept being plural migration societies;
- an accelerated digitisation which, as the new hegemonic growth project that it is, may deepen social divisions and destroy democratic publics, albeit while simultaneously allowing for new forms of democratic engagement and mass mobilisation (e.g. #metoo).
- populist revolts which, despite occurring within democratically constituted states, advance authoritarian power mechanisms;
- an increase in violence, or an increased sensitivity to structural forms of violence (such as poverty, sexualised or racialised violence), including a rise in the social condemnation thereof.

The list of such critical or ambivalent dynamics and the corresponding forms of political processing could certainly be continued. Alternatively, we may assume a perspective which explicitly takes into account, the numerous advantages, alongside some disadvantages, of developments within the listed areas as well. Just as globalisation itself, its socio-economic, cultural and political blowback effects manifest at different times and on different levels. For this reason alone, intensified globalisation and the counter-movements it engenders cannot be interpreted as a simple cause-effect mechanism. Despite some necessary differentiation, the notion of a globalisation blowback generally points to a – historically novel – double movement. The conflicts it produces appear increasingly difficult to manage through familiar democratic channels. Even in the more affluent societies,

faith in fundamental social institutions is eroding. This produces insecurity and uncertainty, crises, social polarisation, conflicts and wars, but also the opportunity and the duty to conceive of a future for modern societies in new ways.

After Rapid Growth

New challenges which are to face society and their interpretations, the corresponding opportunities and dislocations, yet also the search for alternatives to the status quo are at the heart of the Jena double conference. The main theme was specifically selected by its organisers. The link between social and ecological problems will take centre stage, with a special focus on the future of economic growth, including its social, cultural, ecological, technological, and political implications. Moreover, social drivers of and obstacles to growth as well as the corresponding implications for the dynamic and stability of modern capitalist societies will form part of the debate.

This subject matter, which the Jena research team has worked on systematically since 2011, lends itself to a discussion of the historical uniqueness of the ongoing upheaval. Since the outset of the Industrial Revolution, it seemed as if capitalism and rapid, permanent economic growth constituted two sides of the same coin. Although bursts of prosperity generally occurred as the result of crises and in a regionally differentiated form, from a long-term perspective the world economy grew swiftly, particularly in its centres, and exhibited high growth rates. This has changed, at least in the early industrialised countries. According to relevant diagnoses, the economies of these nations may well have left the era of rapid growth behind once and for all (James Galbraith). Indeed, the economies of most OECD countries have exhibited remarkably long-lasting growth periods since the global crisis, but this is unlikely to continue. Institutions such as the IMF are predicting a future of low growth rates for the early industrialised countries. If growth can be generated at all, then, it is accompanied by an increasingly unequal distribution of the wealth produced. Furthermore, an increase in economic growth would result in rising energy and resource consumption as well as climate-damaging emissions, at least under current conditions. Accepted almost unchallenged for a long time as an indicator of rising social prosperity and continuously viewed by politicians as the precondition for social stability, the fossil energy-based growth type is steadily losing its legitimacy among civil society.

Along with the prospect of continuously rising levels of prosperity, the capitalist centres are also losing the social coherence which helped hold together the still eminently wealthy and relatively secure societies of the Global North for a long time. Not only the living standard, but the pacification of the class conflict, the welfare state's redistributive measures and the integrative power of democracy were all founded on the assumption of permanent growth. What happens when this growth fails to materialise, becomes much weaker in the long term, is accompanied by increasingly unequal distribution, can no longer be sustained ecologically, and is no longer desirable culturally? Can market-capitalist societies, as some argue, grow accustomed to low growth rates (James Galbraith)? Can they do so without irreversibly falling behind the high-growth societies of emerging economies in the Global South? Moreover, would the corresponding adjustments be feasible in an ecologically and socially sustainable manner? Or should we assume, as others believe, that capitalism is gradually coming to an end, at least in those places in which it once originated (Wolfgang Streeck)? Are we in fact witnessing the demise of the entire capitalist world system (Immanuel

Wallerstein)? Are we already in the midst of a transformation towards post-capitalist forms of society (Paul Mason, Jeremy Rifkin), or at least new forms of publics, democracy and politics (Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Joan Tronto)? This set of questions represent the conference's guiding themes.

Sociology as Experimental Utopistics?

The selected conference theme deliberately takes us into uncharted, and indeed highly contested territory. The predictive capacities of sociology and the social sciences have never been exactly outstanding. And whenever (viable) alternatives are needed, sociologists only very rarely find themselves in the front row of influential advisers. Faced with the prospect of a future society shaped at least in part by crises, social conflict and social change, and even including the possibility of systemic ruptures, the science of society will not be able to avoid these questions. It appears doubtful, however, as to whether this will actually translate into genuine action directives. The science of society has no authoritative recipes on offer. Its often-lamented inability to predict future developments is due not least to legitimate reasons inherent to any scientific practice. That said, one of sociology's strengths is certainly its ability to observe societies and social developments from highly diverse perspectives. Ideally, its methodological principle is one of constructive, evidence-based and theoretically versed controversy. By relating distinct perspectives and interpretations to one another dialogically and disputatiously, it simultaneously explores different paths of social development.

The conference seeks to provide a platform for 'Experimental Utopistics'. The well-founded (case-based) debate around diagnoses of time and distinct future trajectories of society shall take place not exclusively among sociologists, but in an interdisciplinary forum and enriched by the expertise from social practice. In this sense, the formal-organisational frame of a double conference is part of the attempt to test possibilities and limitations of such sociological utopistics, to explore, as well as question, its usefulness.

Organisational Framing

Following the opening session on the first evening (featuring Branko Milanović and others), the next conference day (Tue, 24 Sept 2019) is reserved for the presentation and discussion of research findings from the Jena Centre of Advanced Studies. Various meetings shall discuss social drivers of and obstacles to growth as well as their structure-forming effects. The general theme 'After Rapid Growth' addresses, among other things, the present and future of globalisation, labour and inequality, social reproduction, natural relations, subjectivities and the good life. The main topics of the debate are 'contours of future post growth societies' – both as a normative orientation and as a social reality. The second conference day (Wed, 25 Sept 2019) shall expand the range of questions and topics considered for further investigation, including setting the course in some highly contested fields. The aim is to explore which dynamics of change are considered effective and what this may imply for future societies. The main points of discussion on this day include global financial markets, class and social structure, sustainability, gender relations, migration and flight, mobility, labour relations, and social movements. Specific topic-based meetings may be organised by the

individual sections. On the third conference day (Thu, 26 Sept 2019), alternative development options for vital social fields shall be discussed based on individual examples. Again, the active participation by the DGS sections is explicitly requested. On the final day (Fri, 27 Sept 2019), the topic of digitisation, and thereby a key future project of neo-capitalist expansion will take centre stage. Parallel to this, we intend to debate more general questions regarding sociology, scientific critique and social publics – considered from a broad range of perspectives, with discussions revolving around the ongoing structural change of the public, yet also the expectations and realities of a global public sociology.

Join in!

Based on the work of the research team and the Jena research profile, the double conference proceeds from an unambiguous working hypothesis: modern capitalist societies find themselves in the midst of a period of profound transformation. This working hypothesis may be shared, contradicted or further refined. At any rate, the appeal goes out to the entire discipline in all its breadth. The topic is well suited to test important prognoses: the limits to growth, the end of labour and the work-centred society (*Arbeitsgesellschaft*), the end of modernity, the end of a society composed of major social groups, the end of history, the end of externalisation, etc. The theme ultimately entails the question of a social future, or the future(s) of society, on all conceivable levels. Due to its experimental character, it facilitates the review and evaluation of sociological research findings in an international and interdisciplinary context. That said, the conference's success depends on the active participation of the greatest possible number of sociologists – whether through panel contributions of their own or as co-discussants. We therefore extend this invitation to all colleagues, students, and anyone interested: come to Jena and join the discussion! Voice your criticism! And, above all: let us imagine and explore possible future paths for modern societies!

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