‘Status quo avant-gardists’ and ‘prevention innovators’
Food for thought for the geographical post-growth debate

Bastian Lange, Hans-Joachim Bürkner

1. Polarised discourses and antagonistic reactions to transformations

Political and media discourses in Germany about climate change, energy efficiency, ecological transformation, urban transition and a renunciation of economic growth principles are currently characterised by all the signs of moral polarisation. It is apparently once again about the eternal fight between good and evil, right and wrong. In contrast to many other political controversies, in these discourses the opponents cannot be easily divided into the powerful and the dominated. Rather, new asymmetrical coalitions can be observed – most recently in the compromise reached for phasing out coal at the end of 2019. Here the government and its previous critics come together in rarely seen agreement to commit to the future good and renounce past evil. In contrast, the majority of the population remains largely silent.

Although socio-economic polarisation is progressing, there are only a few, sporadic examples of ‘deep drilling’ (Bude/Medicus/Willisch 2011) research into geographical milieus that bring differentiation to the coarse-grained debate. Even investigations of environmental awareness in specific milieus often fail to be particularly differentiated, especially if they are loosely based on the well-known Sinus milieus drawn up by the Sinus Institute (Barth/Flaig/Schäuble et al. 2018; cf. www.sinus-institute.de). Such research tends to point out the general relevance of ‘young distanced’, ‘marginal’ and ‘traditional’ milieus (Bundesministerium für Umwelt 2019: 14, 75-78), groups that

are said to have little interest in possible solutions to ecological and environmental change. To date, the spatiality of such milieus is still unclear. The only findings about their spatial distribution or the spatially differentiated self-understandings of actors suggest – if at all – a vague urban-rural division (ibid.).

All other milieus, i.e. the so-called established milieu, the critical-creative milieu, the idealistic milieu and also parts of the bourgeois milieu (Bundesministerium für Umwelt 2019: 15), can be lumped together as one side. These groups react to the pressing ecological and economic crises by deriving imperatives to change capitalist economic models, consumption patterns and lifestyles. On the other side are those who do not want to submit to these imperatives, or at least not yet (the 'marginal, 'young distanced' and 'traditional' milieus). In the broad public discourse, they are often indiscriminately represented by their adversaries as opposing modernisation, denying ecological reason and rejecting dialogue.[1] Furthermore, they are also geographically localised and regionalised: the progressive forces are seen as being located in the urban centres, primarily in West Germany, in contrast the reactionary forces are found in rural areas and in the 'left-behind' peripheries, especially in East Germany.[2]

The terms formulated in the title of this paper, 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators', are not understood here as political battle cries. Rather, they are viewed as impartially as possible as heuristic and exploratory concepts. They are motivated by a decided analytical interest in the identification of milieu-specific, i.e. situated social innovations (see Bürkner/Lange in this volume). This allows research and policy prospects to be identified, ones that reflectively focus on groups that resist transformative policies, changes in values and recommended change. Such resistance takes various forms – sometimes subversive and quiet, but often in open communication, demonstrating discursive skill, political well-informedness and aesthetic value judgements. Those involved are not usually members of previously

1 For example, Chancellor Angela Merkel commented in her speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos on 23.01.2020 that a refusal to engage in dialogue 'should result in sanctions by society' (Gersemann/Zschäpitz 2020).

2 On the same occasion, Chancellor Merkel also reported that these groups need to face different profits and costs in line with their locations: urban dwellers will quickly benefit from the transformation while rural dwellers will bear a large share of the costs (Gersemann/Zschäpitz 2020).

defined Sinus milieus or lifestyle groups, nor are they everyday 'constructors' of social spaces that have already been empirically reconstructed.

Attributable forms of expression and the groups that support them have an enormous socio-political share in the success or failure of transformation efforts. Their performance and impact are usually overlooked in the public discourses, which mostly concentrate on the 'progressive' protagonists of intended change. Significantly, however, their mere presence and public visibility very quickly lead to shifts in the familiar and morally oriented categories of what is supposedly 'good' and 'right' in ecological terms.

Progressive ecological thinking has a counterpart that is often its contrary in terms of worldviews but is not so far apart in subject matter. This cannot simply be described with the popular categorical dichotomy of 'modern versus antimodern'. For instance, the catchwords propagated by members of the party 'Alternative for Germany' (*'Alternative für Deutschland'*, *AfD*) and 'right-wing environmentalists' in rural areas promote a backward-looking, exclusively 'German' attachment to the homeland and thus a return to their 'own' native soil (Röpke/Speit 2019). Ironically, there are links here to the basic convictions held by the progressive forces of younger post-growth orientations, even if only to a limited extent. One example of this is found in the emphasis that both political camps put on local communities, milieu-specific autonomy and a return to manual activities or more simple technologies – thus celebrating a paradoxical conservatism, simultaneously reactionary and progressive. At least a certain amount of green and left-wing moralising may well be due to the perplexity caused by this paradox: such actors sense that they cannot muster convincing arguments to defend themselves against right-wing appropriation.

In a search for the forces working to preserve the status quo, it may initially seem that the centre of society is beyond suspicion. Increased public awareness of dramatic global warming and the related signs of crisis mean that the urgent need for a speedy transformation of the economy and society is now being recognised by the political mainstream. Many political calls and positions adopted by science suggest that it is necessary to implement and enforce changes in the behaviour of the wider population in terms of food, mobility and consumption. In addition to the argumentative basis provided in mainstream discourse, pending legal and procedural regulations are intended to achieve this goal. However, by the end of 2019 there was no notable or measurable change to be seen in figures related to passenger flights

or to the food habits of the German population, for instance in a reduction in CO2 emissions. Even when all possible lag effects are taken into consideration, it seems clear that inertia and resistance to change continue to be ubiquitous and are by no means exceptions to the rule.

2. Why think in terms of 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators'?

In this article we argumentatively approach those designated modernisation and transformation opponents, dialogue blockers and deniers of environmental reason as impartially as possible. To this end, we develop a stance that rejects rampant prejudgements in favour of open analysis and thus turn the page in heuristic terms. We call on our readers to enter into thought experiments and accept a deliberate change of perspectives.

We therefore purposely use the terms 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators' to address groups that are often stigmatised. This shall allow for an unprejudiced and precise view of their positioning vis-à-vis issues of ecologically motivated social change. It shall also illuminate the positions they adopt in larger discourses. By employing these terms, we attribute the putative blockers with the fundamental ability to make original innovations relevant to everyday life. We thus conceptionally distance ourselves with this research programme from the public culture of latent or open prejudgement, which can be contagious within an unsettled research landscape. We perceive the unclear contradictions between an apparently institutionalised, rational neoliberalism and more ad hoc, highly emotionalised and shifting political polarisations to be particularly unsettling.

The article also draws attention to the spatial connotations of rapidly increasing political and social polarisations. In contrast to previous time periods when contrary characteristics were attributed to specific groups of the population and 'their spaces', current social antagonisms are not simply the result of slow auto-dynamic processes of social differentiation, such as social mobility and the emergence of lifestyles. Rather, it can be assumed that the contrasts are deliberately co-produced by politics, and further promoted, in some cases with manipulative intent, to the advantage of the political spokespeople concerned.

Existing socio-economic and socio-spatial disparities in West European societies are thus being politically reframed and rhetorically inflated. They are popularly expressed in opposites like modern/antimodern, progressive/reactionary or eco-conscious/environmentally unfriendly. Conceptual pairs of this sort overlap and colour prosaic opposites like rich/poor, prosperous/crisis-ridden or rural/urban, linking them to moral accusations and assignments of political position.

Crude rhetorical simplifications are no longer limited to the linguistic sphere of everyday media (e. g. digital social networks) but have extended into specialist political, planning and social-policy debates, leading to changes in discursively produced compartmentalisations. Previously empathic narratives of undeserved marginalisation have become narratives containing attributions of anti-progress and latent social threats. They now call for dissociation, a withdrawal of solidarity and sanctions. Simultaneously, such narratives often express general unease with the speed of social transformation and the sudden visibility of social differences rather than convinced political will.

It is not only the apparently progressive discourse that can be interpreted as expressing this unease but similarly also the increasing number of people who are turning to political 'alternatives' with their right-wing nationalist and, in some cases, neo-Nazi policies. These latter 'alternatives' signalise clear intentions towards inertia and a preservation of the status quo (however it may be defined), combined with a tendency towards collective opinions which are anti-progressive, counter-enlightenment and reactionary. The social split associated with progressiveness and reactionaryism probably represents only the tip of a proverbial semantic iceberg. It reduces the far-reaching and complex differentiations of the respective perceptions and policy orientations to simplifying catchwords.

In contrast, social-ecological[3] emancipatory research, which is dedicated to the manifold interactions between societies and natural phenomena, should embrace this social upheaval with curiosity and critical reflection.

3 We use the attribute 'social-ecological' to refer to the social transformations that are associated with individual and collective engagement with environmental problems. This includes social change that comprises changes in ideas and ideologies, social relations, policy orientations, everyday practices and forms of communication. We are aware that similar notions were established by US urban sociology in the twentieth century. However, since our focus is not primarily on the city, misunderstandings should be rare.

Urgently required pointers about the emergence of new discursive coalitions and divisions can be gained from a detailed and accurate understanding of milieu-specific and regional interpretations of the situation. The task is to explore the varieties of the construction of meaning and entrenched perspectives relevant to ecologically motivated transformation processes. Likewise, it can be expected that such an approach will uncover new potential for social integration and building bridges. Not least, it should also enable the formulation of suitably inclusive language, policy and options for institutionalisation.

From the perspective of social and spatial sciences, it is particularly interesting which constructions of meaning, patterns of interpretation and concepts of self-affirmation characterise the activities of the resistant milieus. Which categories (e. g. safety/threat, stability/upheaval, custom/unpredictability, transparency/uncertainty) do these apparently extensive social groupings use to interpret their social and spatial surroundings? How is it that subjective statements are made that seem to be 'contrary to better and available ecological knowledge'? How 'skilfully' do these collectives ignore the dominant discursive frames and the claims to facticity embedded therein? What interpretations of their own otherness do they use to counter them? How are their concepts of otherness locally or regionally created? How effective are the corresponding patterns of interpretation in the public discourses?

In order to provide context and specific detail to this somewhat coarse-grained description of otherness, there is an urgent need to shed more light on the connections between the mainstream's disadvantaging, stigmatising and derogatory ascriptions ('modernisation opponents' and 'dialogue blockers') and the discursive processes that promote them. The aim is thus to confront the unspecific and imprecise ascriptions made by social and political opponents, and their representations in the media, with precise, context-sensitive and scientifically 'grounded' observation.

We assume that there are largely invisible but potentially influential practices of the 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators'. The very fact that they give rise to harsh reactions in politics and the media illustrates the impact they have already acquired. Therefore we embark on a journey to uncover the underlying collective motives, logics of action and patterns of interpretation. On the one hand, the aim is to enable a balanced analysis of social transitions that not only considers for the normatively charged drivers

of change but also gives adequate space to their social counterparts. On the other hand, it is also about driving back the pejorative rhetoric which has spread like wildfire in both public and scientific descriptions of change-resistant milieus as being supposedly anti-modern and socially 'left-behind'.

The purpose then is to highlight simplifications that contribute to further political polarisation of social change. Under the surface of crude political and medial representations there is often much more hidden than these representations suggest about the nature of social conflicts and insider-outsider relations. When, for instance, 'Fridays for Future' activism is abruptly compared with banal 'counterreactions' under the heading of 'Fridays for Engine Capacity' (*Fridays for Hubraum*)[4], this is seldom a realistic portrayal of direct action and reaction, but rather a sham battle stage-managed by the media. However, a closer look reveals that there is an underlying game with numerous subtle commendations and disparagements. This game is already a fixed element of everyday repertoires of thought; it is extensively played in social practice.

In light of the deficit of research to date, it is necessary to decipher and understand not only the changes in social practice but also the supra-individual process logics and discursive reproduction mechanisms involved. The latter are probably in part responsible for reifying the deniers and 'deviators' from the mainstream. The mainstream may be defined by political elites and the media but mostly this lacks empirical evidence. The terminologies used tend to promise something that preemptive normativity turns into 'facts'. Against this backdrop, the reason for pursuing a focused analytical goal can be encapsulated in one sentence: there has been extremely little investigation of the concrete reasons for the popularity of othering. It must be clarified which functions are fulfilled by images of a persistent clinging to the status quo, both on the part of the practitioners and by the victims of othering. We need to know more about the social functions fulfilled by images, e. g. as perceived threats to a community or triggers of insecurity and wishes for homogeneity. To get an idea of the nature of the social-ecological transition that has just begun, we should also know the extent to which images and concepts of 'others' are constitutive of current social-ecological change, beyond evident discourse rhetoric.

4 As was recently done by the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, see https://www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/fridays-hubraum-facebook-greta-klimakrise-1.4646132 (27.02.2020).

Another objective is therefore the detailed analysis of the milieu-specific interpretations of the denials and alternate values consciously chosen by the change-resistant milieus. This in no way means that the intention is to employ analytical rhetoric to vindicate or even dignify these change-resistant milieus wholesale. The point of departure is rather an intention to comprehensively evaluate the phenomenon of 'preserving the status quo' through an analysis that pays attention to context and detail. This necessitates adopting manifold changes of perspective, as required by the logic of qualitative social research (Glaser/Strauss 2008). Only with such changes of perspective will it be possible to determine why the actors concerned view their interpretations of meaning as 'logical' and 'convincing' even though they may contain paradoxical elements.

3. Change and status quo in social-ecological sustainability research

3.1 Approaches in transition research

To date, a dominant part of transition research has focused primarily on the explanation, assessment and evaluation of various ways of handling ecological dilemmas. Descriptions are given, for instance, of possible routes to sustainable, resource-efficient and energy-saving social practices. Processes of change, alternative regional pathways of development, the divergence of pro-ecological initiatives from the mainstream, institutional restructuring and the new governance arrangements they require have attracted significant interest in economic geography and neighbouring disciplines. Spatial differentiation is usually undertaken in terms of urban-rural contrasts and by localising sectoral clusters. In addition, this research focus adopts a critical attitude towards development indicators of the Global North and South (Geels/Schwanen/Sorrell et al. 2018).

This impacts upon the way in which socio-political opposition is manifested in the extra-parliamentary sphere. The migrant crisis, the climate crisis and the global food crisis have triggered resistance to government policies which is supported by initiatives like Fridays (Scientists, Parents, Mothers, Teachers, Students etc.) for Future, Transition Towns and Extinction Rebellion, and also by globally active NGOs like Greenpeace, Sea Shep-

herd and diverse climate alliances. In apparent consensus, they refer to scientific knowledge on the finite nature of planetary boundaries, knowledge that has been available and well-accepted for decades, and call on science to use this as a basis to advocate substantial changes in economic systems, consumption and the associated material flows. The investigative focus of researchers lives up this call. Recently, increased attention has been paid to key actors from ecological vanguard milieus, who are promptly addressed as post-growth pioneers, especially in Western Europe and the Global North.

Numerous models and theories on ecologically relevant social and spatial change explain shifts in development and emerging path deviations and processes of change by referring to the actions of such individuals. Heroic actors play a central role here: risk-friendly entrepreneurs from the green economy; post-growth pioneers experimenting with collective sharing, swapping, repairing and making-at-home (Gebauer/Sagebiel 2015); early adopters of new technologies with their particular values, mobility styles, aesthetics and mindsets; and also prosumers who both consume and produce their own products. They usher in new forms of practice and also allow new regional development paths to become recognisable. These individuals seem unusually open to change and have extraordinarily close experience of transformation. They are assigned attributes like 'innovative', 'creative', 'progressive' and 'modern' and are praised as economic innovators. This labelling practice is in line with the tradition of evolutionary economics, where similar designations are given to central players in innovative regions, creative milieus and clusters (Spigel/Harrison 2018).

In contrast, the opposite side is colloquially described using attributes like 'anti-modern', 'against progress' and 'lagging behind' or – in sociologising jargon – as 'de-coupled', 'isolated' or 'change resistant'. These are social milieus of unknown size, probably equipped (but not empirically evidenced) with high internal cohesion. Their members obviously strive for settled lives and focus on stable interpretations of meaning. Nonetheless, these milieus are rarely understood as sui generis phenomena, i.e. as legitimate structuring elements of social change that should be taken seriously. Transition research is far more concerned with describing them as relicts of all that needs to be overcome and thus as transitional phenomena. This creates the impression that they might unnecessarily lay the groundwork for inconsistent and erratic actionist policies.

Incidentally, this involves not only the NGOs, independent initiatives and coalitions for action but also the government policies of the mainstream. For instance, during the German federal election in September 2017, the German government was primarily concerned with 'making' the recalcitrant milieus compatible with modest mainstream approaches towards changed lifestyles, mobility and food. This was clearly seen in the case of the planned climate package for CO2-reduced infrastructure (see the interview in this volume with C. Mohn on the situation in the Lausitz region). The federal government, however, spoke much less about the social costs implied, or the significance of protests and other forms of opposition for successful transformation, never mind actual negotiations with the 'locals' affected.

3.2 Value-action gaps: Explanations for phenomena of transition resistance

The focus of emerging post-growth analyses has seldom been on explaining the development of resistance to modernisation and progress. Worthy of mention are several interpretations of 'resistance despite knowing better', which are based on psychological experiments. It is suggested that three factors play an important role here: diffusion of responsibility, pluralistic ignorance and 'fear of judgment' (Baecker 1999). First, models of diffusion of responsibility suggest that there is usually a sufficient number of individuals in society ready to undertake the practical implementation of any policy project. From the individual point of view, it can thus always be argued that 'the others should do it first' (ibid.). Second, notions of pluralistic ignorance suggest that in unfamiliar situations individuals automatically prefer to base their behaviour on that of others. However, if – to put it briefly – nobody does anything, then nobody can serve as a model of active intervention and possible change. Third, the concept of 'fear of judgment' suggests that acting in a supposedly wrong way leads to the actors concerned being negatively judged by others.

Psychological consumer research and environmental and sustainability studies offer more explanations. They assume that a discrepancy between knowledge and action exists, known as the value-action gap (Kollmuss/Agyeman 2002). This is said to ensure the retention of familiar and proven patterns of action. In contrast to the similar theory of cognitive dissonance, which holds that resisting change in difficult circumstances is due to people

reviewing their motives for past choices (Beckmann 1984), the value-action gap approach does not focus primarily on motivation but rather on actors' knowledge. Particularly during the spread of social innovations, in society as a whole the paradoxical situation arises that, on the one hand, there is sufficient information to demonstrate that certain lifestyles are disadvantageous. On the other hand, the same lifestyles continue to be led unchanged. For example, missing information about the individual and collective costs of changed behaviour can hinder implementation. We draw further on this concept below in the context of a more fundamental discussion of transformation theory.

3.3 Transformation and milieu analyses

The complexity of comparatively change-resistant social milieus has recently been demonstrated by long-term studies in 'left-behind' East German regions such as Wittenberge (Bude/Medicus/Willisch 2011) and similarly by qualitative research undertaken in the prefabricated housing estates of Lütten Klein near Rostock (Mau 2019). The historical dimension of such milieus has received considerable attention, but observations suggest that there are current milieu constellations in eastern Germany which are equally troubled but have been subject to considerably less research. Such milieus are facing a third social-ecological transformation. The first transformation was triggered by the peaceful revolution of 1989/1990 in the GDR, while the second transformation began with the turn of the century during a dynamic surge in globalisation. It too required people to fundamentally reorient their lives. Finally, the federal government's climate pact of 2019 led to the emergence of another transformation decided upon 'on high'. Henceforth support will be directed towards lifestyles characterised by sustainable and resource-saving mobility and energy. In this complex third transformation, digital technologies and the use of digital communication media play a prominent role in intensifying social and spatial inequality.

The current reactions of the milieus affected by the aforementioned upheavals extend far beyond the visible political resistance seen in eastern Germany. The everyday cultural interpretations and positionings adopted by a cross-section of social strata draw on everyday biographies that include collective experiences with the authoritarianism of the GDR, memories of the powerlessness felt during the transformation of the system in the 1990s,

and sustained notions of the apparently unavoidable victimhood of 'ordinary people'. This is exacerbated by signals of uncertainty from the political camps, which were newly established after German reunification. Such signals include a declining belief in the self-healing properties of market forces on the part of the liberals, but also the increasing relinquishment of old expectations of equality and participation by the social democrats. These changes are of course also reflected upon and interpreted by the milieus. In such a situation, the popularity of change-resistant mechanisms can be plausibly explained by transformation theory in terms of people's growing fear that they will have to face further demands and losses of their vested rights in the course of new upheavals.

3.4 Paradoxes of the current social transformation

Leaving aside the special case of post-socialist transformation and the subsequent post-transformation, it is possible that the incipient post-growth focus, together with increasingly rigid climate policies, may create a paradoxical situation for society as a whole. On the one hand, specialist and everyday knowledge about the finite nature of resources and planetary boundaries is increasing, with equally significant contributions from public discussions, media reportage and political discourse. On the other hand, there is a decline in robust experiential knowledge about how people can give up habitual consumption and ecologically unfavourable lifestyles. Many individuals are unclear about what adaptations to the new conditions could look like. Willingness to engage with these changes is stagnating in wide sections of the population, in line with the inability to formulate concrete, attractive objectives and increasingly strong visions of sacrifice and demise.

Other explanations counter such suggestions by underlining the potency of stable behavioural routines, e. g. habitual practices of everyday consumption, food, mobility and leisure. This seems a defence strategy enacted by political elites who often suggest that habits pass unchanged from generation to generation and can only be influenced by drastic measures. It follows that ecologically 'unreasonable' behaviour can be defined as a generational problem, while environment-consuming production models and neoliberal policies remain unmentioned. The Fridays generation can be safely celebrated as innovators and receive official government approval for justifiably punishing the generations of their parents, grandparents and great-grand-

parents. Quite apart from the paternalist understanding of politics thus exposed ('...they are finally coming to their senses'), the corresponding rhetoric fits into another context of interpretation and narrative that addresses the potential danger to the state posed by an underlying tendency to resist change. This includes recent political accusations concerning the revival of right-wing radicalism, as though it has simply hibernated among the population in recent generations and cannot be controlled without intervention from 'on high'. However, the proponents of notions of habitualism fail to shed much light on the concrete forces working to preserve the status quo in the social milieus.

This is similarly true of the narrative hoping for a technicistic solution to the environmental and climate dilemma (Blühdorn/Butzlaff/Deflorian et al. 2018) and the latest EU Green Deals based on CO2 pricing and climate-friendly economic restructuring (Claeys/Tagliapietra/Zachmann 2019). As paradigmatic technology models, both approaches are intended to replace the current era of production and create a CO2-neutral good life for everyone on the planet. This too tends to deny the ability of the population to regulate and emancipate itself. Furthermore, it largely ignores that a reliance on policies with a technical focus is somewhat paradoxical. It suggests that the negative consequences of technology should be countered with further technological measures rather than with alternative, everyday conceptual approaches. A utopia is thus propagandised but, against the background of increasing criticism of technology, the issue of its concrete implementation receives little consideration. It is assumed that old habitualisations can be simply replaced with new ones, without more precisely analysing the role played by habits in social communities that are already burdened by past transformations. This seems an irony of history rather than a promising strategic inventory of rational policy approaches. Once before, socialist human-beings were to be created on the ruins of habitualised bourgeois lifestyles.

4. Blank spots on the map of transformation research

Social science and social-ecological analyses of transition scenarios have played a considerable part in ensuring that certain ways of dealing with ecological imperatives have already been canonised, collectively internalised and defined as guiding policy principles. They suggest that environmental

destruction and climate change largely preclude political alternatives or policy options. In the public debate, science thus presents itself as a social avant-garde and proves amazingly compatible with a number of parallel political discourses. For instance, recent sustainability studies (Geels/Schwanen/Sorrell et al. 2018) have drawn up normative frameworks intended to provide a basis for future transition. They then focus primarily on issues of planning, consumption, culture or policy linked to the implementation of the 'necessary' transformations, especially in the field of material cycles, mobility resources, fossil fuels and food.

In epistemological terms this normative research orientation has clear consequences. Established imperatives constructed in the political and everyday spheres are used as an implicit yardstick governing investigative logics, even in advance of the research. The research interest is directed towards the practical enactment of new and unquestioned norms, rather than towards constructions of meaning or the specific rationality of incipient social transformation. Numerous best-practice case studies, feasibility studies, impact analyses and efficiency evaluations are therefore employed to develop applied and practicable findings for user-related policy approaches.

Interest is thus directed towards designing the transformation towards more sustainability and future-proofing rather than focusing on exactly what the transformation means for different actors, what unintended side-effects it brings about, and how socially equitable it promises to be (Hargreaves/Hielscher/Seyfang et al. 2013; Wolfram/Frantzeskaki 2016). In this respect sustainability studies conform to urban transition research, as well as much of the post-growth research undertaken by social and spatial sciences. They all share a subcutaneous attitude that involves following imperatives that are viewed as universally applicable, not only by ecological action groups but also by the political establishment. In the following, we use the neologism 'imperativism' to describe such dispositions to act.

This research focus puts the potential actors involved in the pending social transformation at the centre of attention of the spatial and social sciences. As pointed out by the rapidly expanding scholars' debates on post-growth economies (Schulz 2012), much of the research concentrates on supposedly 'new' actors (Lange 2017), e. g. post-growth pioneers, their obvious practices and spatial utilisation patterns (Othengrafen/Romero Renau/Kokkali 2016). If possible, these actors should have already experienced post-growth trans-

formations relevant to their everyday lives and material flows (Baier/Hansing/Müller et al. 2016) or at least be working on their implementation.

So far, so good? Unfortunately not, for two reasons. First, there has to date been no thorough analysis of the continued phenomenon of justified and voluntary resistance to change, i.e. the clinging on to a hard-earned status quo. This refers primarily to the mental dispositions, ways of thinking and forms of habitus of those who do not allow themselves to be convinced by the new imperativism or who at least maintain a certain distance to it. Second, there is scarcely any discussion of the social upheavals that clearly accompany the imperativism.

The deniers discussed above are not simply behaving in an unreasonable way, wanting to keep old habits for reasons of convenience or due to a lack of education or knowledge. On the contrary, they draw their recruits largely from the high-status middle classes, i.e. relatively well-off and better educated groups who are often viewed as the key performers in society. Business elites are also included (Marg/Walter 2015). Nonetheless, they and their views are strangely marginalised in the political discourse, as though real-world power structures were irrelevant for future-oriented ecological debate. After all, these groups command above-average cultural and economic capital. In addition, little is known about the current forms of communitisation developed by these actors, especially about the social relationships inside the social milieus they belong to.

In addition, for problem-oriented social and spatial research, questions arise as to the social preconditions favouring change resistance and the social impacts of such forces. Do those resisting transformation reject all kinds of ecologically motivated changes – including the value-based renunciation of economic growth postulates – or do they actually accept the 'great' imperative while refusing to support the many small changes associated with it? Do they in this case direct their attention rather to regional and sectoral growth, which they continue to view as desirable? In the light of a lack of empirical data it is only possible to speculate here. These issues are also connected to collective imaginaries, narratives and legitimising practices – phenomena that maintain growth moments in the face of the environmental consequences quasi 'despite better available knowledge'.

The resisters and deniers deserve more serious attention than they have hitherto received, whether they are considered as forces braking ecological-political progress or as responsible reflective thinkers or even as inno-

vative reformers divorced from the social-ecological mainstream. Social science research is ill-prepared for such an endeavour. In practical research terms, for instance, disciplinary approaches lack important conceptual building blocks and connective links that would enable them to adapt exogenous knowledge.

The perspectives of other disciplines can be used in a targeted fashion to critically question widely practised normativisms. The initial aim is to examine the situations requiring explanation by using unaccustomed terms and unfamiliar descriptive rhetoric.

5. Discursive dimensions of the resistance

5.1 Discursive framings

As a first step towards filling the research gap discussed above, sociological approaches related to milieu theory and practice theory appear promising. However, important as they are, it might not be sufficient to concentrate on them. In addition to investigating the character of the resisters and their milieus, it is also important to focus on the discourses in which they appear. More precisely, research should target the manifestations, drivers and functions of political positions of resistance in the discourses about social-ecological transformation and post-growth. From the perspective of media theory, the hegemonic framings that drive the marginalisation of resisters, impeders and other non-conformists must first be described. In particular, the localisation of 'deviators' in certain regions and socio-spatial configurations can be a central element of framings of this sort – providing a new research object for basic geographical investigation of socio-spatial disparities. Framing theory of the late 2000s and early 2010s offers a theoretical foundation here (Chong/Druckman 2007; Matthes 2012). It allows the medial and discursive representation of individual population groups and circumstances to be addressed in terms of pre-existing inclusion-exclusion mechanisms and othering processes (Borah 2011).

The concept of othering refers to the practice of attributing 'other' characteristics that deviate from those of one's own group to groups viewed as socially undesirable or inferior (Jensen 2011; Schwalbe 2000). This is closely related to practices of social identity formation and community building.

Therefore, research on othering can easily be combined with milieu theory. Exemplary analyses of 'resistant' milieus and deniers in East Germany may thus reveal othering practices as 'real' social phenomena, i.e. social facts existing beyond the imaginaries implemented in discourse. This makes it possible to explore the external ascriptions and the self-labelling of those affected, both of which transport hegemonic interpretations of otherness. The small shift in perspective towards hegemony and power relations allows othering to be defined as an outcome of social and political co-production. By considering power relations, othering can be defined as an elite project, namely as the process of forming and addressing political opponents. Othering is thus described as a dual phenomenon, as both everyday practice and as a political discursive process.

With a view to East German sensitivities however, it is possible to move even beyond in-depth descriptions of the 'underdogs' of othering. The self-positioning of the resisters in the discourse can also be adequately addressed. In particular, innovative and constructive elements of resistances and their effects can be uncovered. By investigating the winners of previous transformation spurts (e. g. successful entrepreneurs or lifestyle pioneers), it is possible to identify interpretations of the situation that enable those affected to develop proactive attitudes, produce original solutions and take successful strategic action. Simultaneously, the individual and milieu-specific counterforces to such attitudes can be clearly described, especially the tendency to accept victim roles. Such roles may appear to members of the milieu as part of their own concept of action and personality; yet they also see victimhood as a collective fate. Here what requires clarification is the extent to which frustration and resignation are cultivated as milieu-specific attitudes without abandoning the intention to change the circumstances.

This could provide answers to important questions concerning the constitution of 'status quo avant-gardists' in the social, political and media discourses. Similarly, the issue of role assignments and the chances of prevailing in discourse can be addressed. From the perspective of social geography, these ideas are linked to an aspiration to speak as precisely as possible about the emergence of social and spatial inequality among those who do not 'join in' with ongoing processes of social change.

5.2 Hegemonic perspectives on 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators'

In recent German history, transformation discourses have always been hegemonic discourses. In them, their winners usually describe situations of massive change as necessary, compulsory and legitimated by impending dangers. Precisely this hegemonic view is celebrated with startling regularity in debates on the post-socialist transformation of the 1990s and the post-transformation since the millennium. Whether the focus is on the permanent economic crisis following the transfer of West German institutions to the East, or on the dismantling of socialist industries, or on demographic change and population loss in the 'new federal states', or on the eastwards expansion of the EU and revision of the German and European border regime (Bürkner 2020), or on the symbolic geopolitical build-up against the new and old opponent Russia, or on the consequences of the destabilisation of the Middle East and the waves of refugees from European neighbours – deviations from political common sense are repeatedly attributed to the losers of the social transformation of the last 30 years and particularly localised in East Germany.

According to many government statements and media representations, it seems that in East Germany there are large zones characterised by malcontents, modernisation opponents, recalcitrants and even (old and new) enemies of democracy. This is undoubtedly a powerful construction of space that those in power can conveniently use in line with the *divide et impera* ('divide and rule') motto of ancient Rome. Good and evil thereby organise themselves in a quasi-natural spatial division of labour.

What initially appears to be a continuation of Germany's domestic transformation debate – reduced to a crude East-West dichotomy – hides the many nuances and differentiated views on the connection between ecology, the economy and system transformation. Furthermore, this superficial view disguises the internal conditions in the two 'geographical' camps. It is by no means the case that there are no resourceful innovators in the German crisis regions. Innovative start-ups in the high-tech industry in eastern Saxony and environmental sector companies active on the world market with international networks indicate that there are not only losers and deniers in East Germany. It is also not the case that West Germany has no opponents to ecologically motivated modernisation. For example, the West hosts the

permanently crisis-ridden Ruhr area and the rural areas of Lower Saxony with their continued ecological disasters (e. g. the factual and literal 'manure pits' of Germany produced by regional industrialised agriculture). However, these maldevelopments have not triggered noteworthy critique of the relevant politics. On the contrary, these regions are examples of mental and political resistance to change where refusers range from local elites to ordinary citizens.

The national policy discourse and the media debates in Germany do not, however, focus on cooperative learning from the political conflicts surrounding social renewal and the possibility of post-growth. Rather, old resentments are used to further everyday political interests, both to increase newspaper circulations and to gain votes.

6. On the emancipation of the 'status quo avant-gardists' in the post-growth debate – an initial résumé

It cannot be overlooked that in interest-driven discourses, views are strategically advanced that decide on the collective ascription of particular characteristics to people and places. The confrontation with resisters, impeders and 'blockers', and even with their apparently natural habitats, is not only argumentative but also emotionally ridden and moralising. It can be easily identified as part of a hegemonic discourse and corresponding framing.

This opens up promising fields of activity for social and spatial sciences concerned with the phenomenon of change resistance. The first step must be to consider the relevant actors, their political positions, social practices and discursive interventions more closely. It can do no harm to apply a little dialectics in order to avoid the suggestive power of polarising figures of thought. We draw on the dialectic concept of the Frankfurt School of sociology (Adorno 2000) which aims for the open-ended reconstruction of social developments with all their contradictions. In social practice, supposedly conservative elements are always associated with progressive elements. Their individual meaningfulness becomes apparent only in relation to their respective counterparts. Accordingly, a clinging to the status quo can only arise from the actors' cognitive, emotional and social engagement with the alternative positions and modes of behaviour – in this case with active change.

In concrete terms, this may mean that the supposed deniers have good reasons for not (or not immediately) affiliating themselves with superficial action postulates and instead favour more fundamental engagement with alternative ideas. These ideas need not necessarily be reactionary or ignorant of the problem. Especially in times of symbolic policymaking and hectic actionism, pronounced obstructors can also be sources of innovative inspiration. These actors often declare their own forms of social practice, everyday experiences and sensibilities as the starting point of a search for practicable solutions – and thus reject abstract, untried or ideologically preformulated blanket solutions (see Marg/Walter 2015 on the mental and strategic orientations of medium-scale entrepreneurs). Social-ecological analysis should focus more closely on precisely these actors and their deliberate positioning in difficult discursive terrain.

Those affected may hope for open debate, but at present their attempts to influence the future development of society with their 'divergent' demands meet with a rather violent rejection of the thinking on which they are based. Ironically, in the current debates on climate and post-growth – with their rhetoric of urgency and a lack of alternatives –, demands for emancipation and open-ended search processes are in constant danger of being marginalised. With the rhetorical figure of illegitimate 'divergence', such demands can easily be stigmatised as politically undesirable by advocates of the supposedly incontrovertible imperative. This can foster a new authoritarianism that is diametrically contrary to the goals of a broadly based ecological transition and the inquisitive testing of post-growth practices.

This tendency can become a marked brake on innovation, namely if the hegemonic ascriptions of others are repeatedly adopted by those affected. From the perspective of social sciences, it is therefore necessary to carefully observe the extent to which milieu-external sovereignties of interpretation paralyse willingness to act and proactive strategies. In the future, the ambivalent situation of those already marginalised in political space or those threatened with marginalisation must be made visible in good time. This ambivalent situation arises from the dilemma of wanting to be socially and economically innovative but being assessed as incapable of innovation.

The inclusion-exclusion problem involved in othering practices and framings of 'divergence' makes clear that the primary concern of the politically marginalised can only be to work towards their own emancipation. Future analyses must therefore aim to uncover the emancipatory elements

of the change-resistant perspective and to describe the degree to which the actors concerned are potential or de-facto avant-gardists, rather than treating them as marginalised groups who lack any potential for change or even a claim to power. If such research findings then feed into the ongoing post-growth debate, then it may be possible to shift the emancipatory perspectives, which are still frequently labelled as a minority concern, into the mainstream.

7. Further ideas and consequences for the discipline

The recognition of research deficits immediately triggers further conceptual questions. From the perspective of milieu theory and discourse theory, it is necessary to provide a context-oriented analysis of change resistance and its impacts, focusing on social differentiations. It can be assumed that supposedly isolationist movements – especially if they are perceived as regional phenomena – indicate more general social resistance that should be analysed and discussed on a broader basis.

It should be noted here that social transformation discourses are not only influenced by abstract norms, values and action logics but also by the interests of heterogenous actors and their prospects of prevailing. Actors enter the confrontations with different socio-economic statuses, different amounts of social capital, different concrete (social, economic and symbolic) profit expectations and different ascribed (qua status) and acquired (in discourse) power or ability to assert themselves.

Greater contextualisation of the regionalisation processes of change resistance is also urgently required. These processes should be understood as an expression of individual and temporary assertions of sovereignty, which emanate from regionally anchored milieus. In their particular spatial-temporal manifestations, such regionalisations can overlap with older socio-spatial disparities. For example, transition processes prescribed by policy from 'on high' (the phase-out of coal, the mobility transition, the taxation of fossil fuels) can lead to a weakening of socio-economic positions simply as a result of marginalising actors because of their spatial distribution, especially when they live in peripheral regions or act as commuters at some distance from centres).

Are these change-resistant milieus then really interested in preventing further socio-economic marginalisation and that is the only reason why they cling to apparently obsolete patterns of mobility, lifestyles and consumption? Or are the denial positions adopted rather as a consequence of the marginalisation of these milieus in the public and political discourses, i.e. tendentially independent of concrete experiences of spatial-social disparities? Such research questions indicate the need to consider new geographical fragmentations and processes of social peripheralisation as normal objects of investigation in post-growth research.

Finally, it is time to pursue focused analyses of discourses and framings to gain important indications of paradoxes, hybridisations and ambivalences in the post-growth debate. Social sciences have for some time been aware that these phenomena are central characteristics of postmodernism; however it is nonetheless easy to lose sight of concrete symptoms and indicators. Reflexive processes are found much more frequently in situations of transition than in plateaued phases of social development. This is because dissent, diverging policy objectives and social upheavals are then more apparent than in less conflictive times. Discursive processes of marginalisation and the imposing of public sanctions on 'deniers' have a direct impact on the social positioning and scope of influence of those affected – which often results in what was weak resistance developing into tougher opposition. In such cases, the attribution 'denier' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Under these conditions, the critical social sciences must urgently reject hegemonic opinions concerning what is 'good' and 'right'. A failure to do so risks the development of a knowledge culture that affirms existing power imbalances. Such developments are hardly compatible with emancipation and calls for debates on equal footing for all.

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