IV. Spaces of Design

‘Post-growth planning is also art and experimentation. Failure is part of it and simultaneously the start of a new experiment aiming at achieving social-ecological transformation.’

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Spatial transformations: Process, goal, guideline?

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This article aims to situate 'transformation' in spatial and planning practice, primarily in the debate about spatial guidelines. This focus arises from the widespread impact that talk of the transformation has now achieved, at least in the German-speaking world. The term 'transformation' has implicit if not explicit guideline character, both in German-speaking countries (WBGU 2011) and internationally, although the focus of 'sustainability transitions' is here somewhat different (Frantzeskaki/Broto/Coenen et al. 2017). Both discourses are increasingly relevant for operationalising paths of post-growth development.

The primary research question addressed by this chapter is: Can spatial transformation be viewed as a guideline and if so, how does this manifest itself specifically in analytical, normative or procedural terms? Does transformation lay claim to being generally applicable or does it have specific focuses – what is the concrete formulation of goals for which level? Or should transformation be understood primarily as a procedural standard, as a metaphor for collective mobilisation towards change, the substance of which tends to remain hidden behind sometimes quite cumbersome participatory processes? Before answers to these questions are explored, the two concepts at the heart of this discussion are briefly considered.

(Great) transformation

The first focus of this discussion is the 'great transformation' (*Große Transformation*, *GT*) or its semantic sister 'sustainability transitions' (STs), which became extremely popular in research and practice in the 2010s. The use of 'great' in the transformation discourse clearly draws on the work of Karl

Polanyi (1944) as an ideological-historical source, which offers an extremely stimulating synopsis of social, economic and political development. The focus here is on two things: firstly, on experience of the decline of liberal political constitutions under authoritarian regimes and, secondly, on the tension between market liberalism and democracy described by the term 'double movement'. Polanyi viewed this tension as being basically unresolvable as it is unlikely that large-scale political restructuring can be reconciled with democratic principles and practices to any great extent. Part 3 of Polanyi's book then deals with the conditions of freedom in complex societies. Nevertheless, fundamental to Polanyi's thinking is the notion that economic dynamics must be socially 'contained' or re-embedded by an active, interventionist state.

(Great) transformation is related to this tradition of the re-embedding of unfettered technological and economic dynamics in society. This refers to the 'massive, ecological, technological, economic, institutional and cultural process of transition' (Schneidewind 2018, translated from German) facing the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It seems that this transition is the only way to solve the many crises of the industrial, natural, economic and social system. Transformation and sustainability transitions thus now represent a kind of mainstream of current environmental, technological and sustainability research (Zolfagharian/Walrave/Raven et al. 2019). As was demonstrated by the choice of topics for the 2019 ARL Congress, which then gave rise to this volume, transformation is now also established in urban and spatial discourse. The heightened sensitivity to evolutionary change found in the transitions debate is particularly inspiring, because at its heart is the search for transitions (!) from situations that really exist to favoured or apparently necessary states. This is linked to questions concerning alternative discourses and how generalisable strategies for sustainability can emerge from niche or pioneer concepts.

The reports by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (*Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen, WBGU*) contributed tremendously towards popularisation of the great transformation (WBGU 2011, 2016). The WBGU addressed the great transformation in its 2011 report 'World in Transition' ('*Welt im Wandel*') and emphatically thematised the subject of a 'social contract'. In its 2016 report 'The Relocation of Humanity: The Transformative Power of the Cities' ('*Der Umzug der Menschheit: Die transformative Kraft der Städte*'), transformation was considered

in a specific spatial and urban setting for the first time. The report focused on urbanisation processes and cities, linking global, socio-ecological contexts with the question of urbanisation processes. However, the WBGU's arguments are not free of causal fallacies. This is particularly the case for the specific construction of the urban: the fact that the majority of the population is localised in urban areas does not mean that the essence of the problem can be solved in the cities or by the cities or, indeed, that this should be the primary gaol. Angelo and Wachsmuth (2015) criticised this perspective as 'methodological cityism'; the focus on the cities overlooks the crucial role played by the nation states and supranational regulation even in the so-called urban age.

In order to achieve the goals of the great transformation in the urban context, the WBGU report (2016) discusses ambitious normative stipulations. Urban areas – and spatial planning within them – have a key role in the implementation of transformative strategies. 'We need spatial planning!' (translated from German) was the credo proclaimed by Dirk Messner when he presented the report in a keynote lecture at the Dortmund Conference for Spatial and Planning Research in 2018. However, the audience, consisting mostly of representatives of spatially relevant planning and research, were not inclined to automatically accept this dictum – a scepticism that is probably based on a realistic assessment of the status and actual performance of spatial planning. In terms of policy and planning theory, the WBGU's rejection of incremental solutions in favour of one large initiative is somewhat troublesome – especially as the relevant sponsors, strategies and instruments are not identified: 'Within a few years, a paradigm shift must take place in cities: away from incremental approaches, towards transformative changes, in order to preserve the natural foundations of human life and people's quality of life in the long term' (WBGU 2016: 20, translated from German). In contrast, other authors see GT as part of a traditional incremental understanding of planning which uses adaptive strategies to react to increasingly disruptive change (Iwaniec/Cook/Barbosa et al. 2019).

By using the term 'great' (*Große Transformation*), the WBGU report explicitly refers to the political-economic tradition of thought associated with Polanyi. It is therefore all the more surprising that it is in this field that the paper displays its greatest weaknesses: 'It would only be possible to speak of a great transformation in Polanyi's terms if alternatives to the self-regulating market system and market-conform adjustments were sought. If we use this

yardstick as a basis, then the half-heartedness of the WBGU's reference to Polanyi becomes clear, as indeed is the case with many other contributions to transformation research' (Thomasberger 2016: 34, translated from German). The WBGU's urbanisation report of 2016 also remains vague about who may be able to tackle the comprehensive task of social transformation in a relatively short time – the global society, pioneers of change, key actors? It contains little of significance about institutions. While general statements are made about land and property, there is a lack of robust proposals on how it might be possible to implement a reorientation of property relations and how the frictions and conflicts inevitably associated with this could be resolved. Schneidewind (2018) is more concrete in his proposals and also reflects on the conditions of the political economy. However, his notions are not necessarily easier to implement: basically, he suggests, all levels and actors of the transformation need only to be properly interconnected with each other.

The redesign of local practices as genuinely *transformative* action can undoubtedly bring new blood to politics, which has clearly manoeuvred itself into dead-ends with its administrative routines, entrenched conflicts of interest and piecemeal solutions. The temptation to overcome such dilemmas with one large initiative is obvious. However, practised transformation has yet, I believe, to prove its effectiveness – and inherent advantages to existing practices. Questions are rightly being asked about the almost inflationary use of real labs: it is at least unclear exactly how existing institutions are to be incorporated into new practices and approaches. And the equally inflationary demand for public participation in whatever transformation may be implemented (although no objections can be raised to participation in principle), triggers the following question: What can be done to avoid the problems of randomness, erraticism and particular interests that are usually found in the 'nightmare of participation' (Miessen 2012, translated from German)?

Guidelines

Guidelines form the second focus of this discussion – against a backdrop that assumes that the great transformation has itself become such a guideline. There seems to be widespread consensus that GT should not be an objective in itself and also that it is not primarily about the process as such,

even though this is the impression occasionally made. In its comprehensive approach, GT represents a guideline, a model, a kind of utopian narrative (Giesel 2007; Dahlstrom 2014; Zieschank/Ronzheimer 2017). It offers alternatives to the status quo in what initially appears to be a consistent framework and links general issues (such as the question of growth) with practical and local strategies. In spatial terms, GT builds upon well-known elements of sustainable urban and spatial development, linking them to the narrative of a larger whole. However, the construct of 'transformation' is like its predecessors. They all, de facto, comprise a rather contradictory mixture of control and development goals, of spatial and sectoral focuses, and, finally and decidedly, of procedural elements. In practice, they tend to be somewhat heterogeneous and always extremely abstract, and in this way they achieve a certain hegemony or majority support. Over time such guidelines have proved changeable, occasionally even opportunistic, driven by the *Zeitgeist* (Hesse/Leick 2013). Not only do individuals pursue specific problem interpretations and need to compete for funding, but they are also dependent on temporary fashions, conjunctures and constructs.

This is well-illustrated by the spatial policy discourses of the 2000s and early 2010s, which experienced two major 'turns' and hence changes in focus, at least in the German-speaking and European context. Since the mid-1990s, many European countries have been characterised by a focus on growth instead of the traditional objective of 'spatial balance'; this has been equally true of countries with a decidedly statist planning tradition like Great Britain, the Netherlands and Germany. The focus on growth was associated – not necessarily empirically – with cities or metropolitan regions thanks to their supposed role as drivers of economic development (Aring/Sinz 2006). In the last decade, the multi-layered development processes of urbanised areas (both metropolitan areas and medium-sized urban regions) and changed political perceptions have led to a shift in focus to peripheralisation processes and the areas affected by them, especially rural areas, peripheral regions and places with shrinking populations and negative economic development. Attention is now being paid to places that are 'left behind', not least because their populations have increasingly expressed political dissent (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Most recently, discourses about guidelines and models have begun to include notions of homeland (*Heimat*) and spatial identity, occasionally in a fruitful way, occasionally in association with rather platitudinous attitudes and associations. GT appears here as a unifying super-

structure, the really major approach among current narratives on 'green' and 'smart'.

What do these experiences of framings of guidelines for policy and planning strategies teach us for the GT? What should we expect with the 'great' challenges? Are they, as it were, once-in-a-century problems which demand the use of all the big tools the guideline offers and with which practice is correspondingly equipped…? Or are there good reasons for restraint in light of spatial planning's critical self-image (see Lamker/Levin-Keitel 2019 and other papers there)? At first glance, there seems to be much in favour of bringing great narratives into the real world, not least because the problematic situation clearly demands this. At the same time, however, caution is called for: it is important to know what the challenges are and how risks should be dealt with (Blythe/Silver/Evans et al. 2018). It follows that the GT discourse should not only be pluralised but should also be normatively disarmed. It should certainly be possible to describe the extent of the challenge with appropriate precision without losing all humility in the face of the demands made on policy, planning and the shaping of society. If a surplus of normativity leads to positivist traps or promises solutions prematurely, this is also unfavourable for planning.

Critical evaluation

What does all this mean for science and practice? The economist Frank Beckenbach has described the deliberate transition from the transformation of society (or more precisely, from the self-transforming society) to the transformation society as a 'transformation illusion' (Beckenbach 2017). He argues that the term and the concept awaken three types of unrealistic expectations concerning the shaping of society: a *planning* illusion in terms of the predictability and controllability of complex societies; a *regulating* illusion in terms of targeted collaboration between market actors, state actors and civil society actors; and finally an *acceptance* illusion concerning the willingness of society, and not just social niches, to follow such a path. His summary, which he substantiates in scientific (economic) terms, is that the great transformation is unsuitable for use as a guiding principle. The sociologist Armin Nassehi (2019) recently expressed this in more everyday language in an interview with the newspaper *taz* that is well worth reading: 'Anyone can

formulate goals' (translated from German), he comments rather sardonically. On the other hand, he argues, formulating robust strategies, implementing those strategies in complex societies and reliably evaluating their effects is much more demanding. This appears to be the real challenge of targeted transformation policies.

This leads to the observation that, at heart, transformation debates still appear to be strongly influenced by the logics and demands of research, as can be seen in the sheer quantity of relevant publications. In comparison, new paths leading to changed practices are greatly underdeveloped. Or, as Koch, Kabisch and Krellenberg (2018: 13) expressed it in their review:

> 'While the normative understanding of urban transformations has gained considerably in importance in urban-related studies and even first steps towards a transformative turn can be identified, this is not reflected in current development processes in cities (…). An implementation gap between the theoretical concept and the empirical cases is clearly visible.'

Furthermore, the literature contains sufficient evidence of implementation problems of the sort that have long confronted normative concepts like sustainable development. Many of the transformation paths that are implemented on a sectoral level are not particularly new and thus do not necessarily enrich the discussion or promise a more effective impact. It seems typical that the corresponding lists fail to actively address past experiences or deal with the barriers to implementation faced by targeted transformation.

This begs the question as to what is genuinely new about transformation – except for greatly increased ambitions concerning social control. I argue that what is new is, *firstly*, the specific relationship between research and practice. Science has assumed an engaged role and adopted a narrative position, problem-oriented rather than fusty, transdisciplinary rather than traditional. Of course, knowledge production and dissemination are fundamental to every transformation, but this development nonetheless triggers questions. With the missionary, almost religious approach of some of the apologists for total transformation, science is, I believe, treading on thin ice – it is making itself dependent on good intentions and interests. Familiarly, this does not always end well. In my opinion, arguments drawn from the philosophy of science speak for more scepticism, perhaps also restraint. I most certainly do not share the view that universities should prioritise their third mission – i.e.

to promote 'transfer' in addition to research and teaching – so it becomes their first mission and should subordinate all practices to this goal (Schneidewind 2018, Section 21). Instrumentalising research in this way would not only fail to make transformation more realistic, it would also damage science. This problem was addressed in detail in a statement on dealing with 'great societal challenges' (translated from German) issued by the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat 2015). The great complexity, global dimensions and disciplinary composition of the new types of problems complicate the process of finding the right positioning for science policy and strategy. This has repeatedly led to critical discussion in the 'inner circle' of transformation research (see Grunwald 2015, Strunz/Gawel 2017; Grunwald 2018). Perhaps the interplay of two ideal-types of actors could lead to changed practice: the positioning of research as an 'honest broker' (Grunwald 2018) as postulated by Roger A. Pielke (2007), and the understanding of practice as the action of reflexive practitioners (Schön 1983). This combination could give rise to robust approaches. However, a positioning of this sort demands from both sides 'a high degree of reflexivity and argumentative transparency, the ability to learn not only in analytical-empirical terms but also in normative terms, and a constant questioning of former positions' (Grunwald 2018: 116, translated from German).

What would be new, *secondly*, would be if transformation research considered the implementation of its proposals in more detail, specifically in terms of framework conditions, potentials and barriers (see Dörre/Rosa/Becker et al. 2019). This has similarly not yet been successfully undertaken by sustainability research. Transformation and sustainability approaches share a common problem in that the extension of the normative timeframe for targets has not automatically led to an increase in their effectiveness. What adjustments should institutions make, how should social security systems be restructured to meet new requirements, what consequences would system transformation have for policymaking, for distributive justice? Which hard cuts can be expected and which gains could compensate for them? In my opinion, a sober view of political realities is required rather than euphemistic talk of a great transformation (see Bettini/Arklay/Head 2017). Valuable stimuli could also be provided by the established political-science field of transformation research, which attracted increased attention in the course of the political transformation of 1989/90 (see Kollmorgen/Merkel/Wagener 2015). Transformation research traditionally investigates the significance

of systemic change (political, economic) for institutions, economic systems, practices of political regulation and lifeworlds. Drawing on the overview in Kollmorgen, Merkel and Wagener (2015), there appear to be numerous ideas for further developing the discussion. On the other hand, this most comprehensive presentation has few links to ecological transformation, and even fewer to spatial development. Both discourses deserve more interaction with the other.

Conclusions

Returning to the primary research question, it seems that the charm of 'transformation' may be found in the fact that this term offers an appropriately differentiated notion of evolutionary social change. This represents true progress: this analytical dimension of the term is convincing and should be explored further. On the other hand, it seems unclear whether the concept is sufficient to robustly guide the intended change – does transformation offer more substance than, for instance, sustainable development? Not that this should be understood as opposing the experimental, open and subversive character of transformation per se. However, engaging on the level of the great transformation requires more than just a collection of individual measures and bullet points listing everything that can be thought of or has perhaps been heard around the place, occasionally with a touch of radicalism. I follow Ulrich Brand's (2016) dictum here, that the strategic use of 'transformation' does not necessarily help solve the manifold crises of our times. This is particularly true of the inflationary use of the term – which leads to the specifics of the approach being blurred in a melange of everything and anything, obscuring the potentials of redefining social change dynamics and the corresponding policies not only in terms of terminology but also of content.

If the aim is to credibly, not only metaphorically, engage on the large scale, then concrete ideas for macro-management are required, ones that appropriately influence fundamental determinants of socio-economic development (such as the taxation system, a possible basic income, the recently discussed land question, the role of growth as a driver and constraint ...). And there must be some notion of how such ideas can be implemented and what effects and secondary effects their introduction will have, especially in social terms (Blythe/Silver/Evans et al. 2018). If entry into a post-growth

era does indeed turn out to be a 'crisis-like and mostly undesirable consequence of structural change' (Wiesenthal 2019: 379, translated from German), then multifaceted frictions are inevitable and we will need to react to them. Only against this background is it possible to consider, experiment with and try out concrete planning tasks. However, this involves a certain dilemma for spatial discourses, which have good reasons for remaining small scale rather than tackling the large scale. As long as the great transformation omits the macro-level (Thomasberger 2016) and aims to provide blueprints for micro-processes instead, then it is nothing more than sustainability in a new guise. This would lead to transformations but not necessarily to the great transformation. Under these conditions, the added value of the grand narrative would be exhausted in 'enchanting' reality, as Tom Sieverts puts it (Sieverts 2015: 19, translated from German). It would not by any means, however, fundamentally change this reality and it is also unclear whether it would in fact be any more suitable than other concepts discussed to date, such as sustainable development. There is therefore a risk that the debate on transformation simply represents a short-lived hype. In the labyrinth of transformations that are really taking place – the desirable, the unintended and the accidental –, it seems that the concept of the (great) transformation has still to prove itself as an effective vision.

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