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Socioecological Transformations

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ULRICH BRAND, BIRGIT DAIBER

The Next Oxymoron?

Debates about Strategies Towards Transformation

Due to the multiple crisis of finance and the economy, of climate change and resource depletion, of gender relations, societal integration and political representation, in recent years the term ‘transformation’ has become more and more prominent. It is used analytically in the sense that the world is considered to be experiencing today a major transformation towards a globalised system which is becoming multipolar and can not any longer be politically steered. Karl Polanyi’s ‘great transformation’ from the agrarian to the industrial society is the conceptual reference here. The term is also used normatively to indicate that given such various and severe problems, the world needs to be transformed into a more just and sustainable society. Again, Polanyi comes into play with his thoughts about the re-embedding of an economy which was formerly disembedded. And the term ‘transformation’ has an interesting semantic connotation, since it suggests a kind of radical change.

However, ‘transformation’ has the potential to become an oxymoron (like sustainable development) that opens up an interesting epistemic terrain but remains then blurred. Many contributions refer to the term because it is fashionable but it might become increasingly unclear if there is a certain ‘core of meaning’. However, such a core meaning does not simply ‘exist’ but needs to be worked out.

Among other things, and this is the starting point of the current issue, a more thorough analysis of the context of transformation is needed, i.e. the manifold experiences which are made in different places and at various scales. Theoretically speaking, we need to think the ‘subject of transformation’ (often referred to as governance) but probably it is more complex than a simple mode of steering because it includes everyday practices and

subjectivities, societal dispositives and economic relations. And we need a better understanding of the ‘object of transformation’ because all too often this remains unclear: Does it encompass the (world-)society, concrete and general problems, the crisis? The authors’ proposal is to think domination-shaped political, economic and cultural societal relations as an ‘object’ which needs to be changed – and which also co-constitute the ‘subject’ of transformation.

In this issue of *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik* we want to explore some crucial aspects of this debate (see abstracts at the end of the respective articles) by referring to theoretical debates and recent experiences. This special issue is a result of a workshop which was held in June 2011 in Brussels. About 20 scholars and activists came together in order to better understand what is going on in the actual crisis, how to make sense of it and how to link it to the current transformation debate. The regional focus was Europe and Latin America, a focus which is also mirrored in the contributions to this volume.

Birgit Daiber presents some important results of ongoing debates among Latin American scholars about the space of action of progressive governments. Alex Demirović refers to historical debates about reform and revolution, their meanings and shortcomings, and proposes an integration of the productive historical experiences and horizon under the heading of transformation. Maristella Svampa explores one of the most dynamic and pressing developments in Latin America in the last decade: the (re-)orientation of economic policy towards resource extractivism and the broad Commodity Consensus. Edgardo Lander looks more closely at the antinomies of progressive governments, their strategies, successes and failures, by comparing different countries. The focus is, however, on Venezuela. Oscar Vega Camacho analyses in depth the case of Bolivia by comparing the core advances of its new constitution and the ambitious aims of a decolonisation with concrete developments. Ulrich Brand introduces the distinction between transition and transformation in order to better understand the meaning of the debate about a green economy and puts it into the context of a potentially emergent green capitalism.

First of all, as guest editors we want to express our gratitude to the authors for their articles and the participants at the Brussels workshop for their contributions. Moreover, we would like to thank the Rosa-Luxem-

burg Foundation Brussels for having organised and financed the workshop and supported the publication of this special issue, Bettina Köhler for her editorial work on that issue, the translators for their translations, and the anonymous reviewers for their excellent and thoughtful comments. We hope that we can contribute to one of the most dynamic and important debates of our times.

Vienna/Brussels, August 2012