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## **Socioecological Transformations**

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**ALEX DEMIROVIĆ**

**Reform, Revolution, Transformation**

The OECD countries are facing multiple crises involving a number of discrete yet interlocking crisis dynamics (cf. Demirović et al. 2011). In addition to the crises of the financial market and of the economy, societal nature relations is in many ways disturbed, particularly with respect to the climate, to energy and water, to food, and to the urban-rural relationship; moreover, the labour market is in crisis, as are labour relations and the living situation of many wage dependent people, as well as the social systems, mobility, education and training systems, and the forms of reproduction of the subject. The need for change is accordingly great, and far exceeds measures for dealing solely with the current economic crisis. Moreover, it goes beyond the crisis situation itself, for even that which is considered as desirable normality and stability is not sustainable. Different crisis policies are showing themselves to be a form of social domination which attempts to crowd many contradictions out of society, only to find them to deepen the crisis. This large number of generic crisis elements is an indication of the precarious character of these 'normal conditions of living'.

In all these respects, it appears that the highly developed societies are moving in slow motion. No problem is being solved. The nuclear accident at Fukushima has shown this clearly once again; it is like the repetition of the situation in 1986, after Chernobyl. For the neo-liberal form of capitalist dominance is also a robber of time; three decades have been lost. Relevant insights made during the '70s and '80s were not implemented, so that we are forced to repeat them again today. Society's development path must be made subject to a democratic process of discussion and decision-making (cf. Allespach et al. 2010).

Neither in a reformist nor in a revolutionary manner has the left really been able to make a breakthrough. As far as revolutionary politics are

concerned, this would appear obvious, for there is overwhelming evidence to indicate that the familiar socialist political revolutions have clearly not succeeded in bringing about the realisation of the emancipatory goals with which they have symbolically been associated. However, reforms, too, have failed to achieve the results expected of them. The experience with reforms, reform-oriented parties and reformist governments which were also supported by left forces – in Germany, the Social Democratic-Liberal coalition of the 1970s and the Red-Green coalition between 1998 and 2005 – have taught us that here, too, a reversal of the original goals was possible. Like revolution, reform, too, cannot, in view of its decades-long experience, any longer be carried out in accordance with its objectivistic orientation; rather, it too is being forced to consider its failure and the consequences thereof. Any radical policy today must address this issue of the evaluation of its practice and its results.

The dialectic of revolution and reform must be rethought. Although the two terms have, in the history of the socialist movement, often been seen as opposites, today, after the failure of both strategies, the question arises of the conception of a strategy of *transformation* which would have the support of many societal groups, as it would give them the space and the possibilities to pursue their respective emancipatory goals. In the following, I would first of all like to identify one of the problems connected with the terms ‘revolution’ and ‘reform’. The foil for that is the ‘need for political action’ which is so often being called for in political discussions. In the second section, I will present arguments for the term ‘transformation’. Finally, in the third section, I will present three examples of approaches to transformation. If transformation is seen not as an evolutionary process, but rather as the result of societal, democratic action, actors will have to be clear as to the level at which transformation will have to be initiated, what barriers such a strategy will have to count on facing, and which preconditions transformation actors will have to fulfil in order to be successful.

## **I. The dilemmas of revolution and reform**

In theories of societal change or evolution, the view is often put forth that these processes of societal development are rarely accessible to

the collective will of people. However, in view of the depth of the crises which characterise global society, the question arises as to the possibilities of democratic access to societal paths of development, and hence the problem of public discourse and of democratic decision-making ability. This leads me to the more abstract question of the time – or rather the timeframes – which reforms or revolutions will require. It appears that in the historical discourse on the topic of revolution or reform, revolution has been associated with urgency, determined action and the promise of rapid solutions to problems, while reform has been associated with a slow, cautious, hesitant, evolutionary approach. My impression now is that the temporal semantics have changed, and that the timeframe assumptions of past years have indeed been reversed. Kathrin Buhl has addressed this issue with a view of the Latin American situation: “The question as to how we can succeed in developing sustainable, just economic models dedicated to people rather than to profit, remains a challenge. More difficult yet: the process will necessarily be *longer-term*, but the present conditions of living of large parts of the Latin American population demand immediate solutions, which appear possible only through a continuation of the existing economic model and a state-organized redistribution process. There is grave doubt as to whether this path might not necessarily mean an abandonment of the transformative processes – apart from the fact that it contains no solutions for the ecological problems” (Buhl 2010: 6, emphasis AD). Thus, it is precisely the urgency of freeing people from the deepest poverty which forces radical solutions into the background. By contrast, the discourse of former days would have argued for moving on quickly to a revolution and the political seizure of power, for only a revolution promised the rapidity with which societal problems could be changed for the better. For:

- (a) The market, which is oriented toward profit and not toward the needs of society, can be considered inappropriate, because it is too slow, too selective, too particular, and too contradictory to mobilise collective resources for solving society’s problems. The most recent example can be seen in Japan; after the triple catastrophe of an earthquake, a tsunami and a nuclear accident, and the resulting economic collapse, the rating agencies downgraded Japan’s credit-worthiness. Precisely at the point where Japan needed worldwide solidarity, and was receiving it to some extent through contributions and through support by the scientific commu-

nity and the governments of other countries, the ‘markets’, i.e. primarily those institutional investors who had just been rescued by governments, turned against Japan.

(b) Parliamentary democracy, with its dependence on business, with its rhythms and legislative terms, its changes of governments and oppositions, its principle of representation, its exercise of control through general legislation, and its generally weak monetary powers, favours irresponsibility, corruption, misdirection and the failure of controls. Especially in view of the ecological dynamics of crisis, it is too slow and too ineffective (cf. Demirović 1997: 183ff).

Nevertheless, in the context of the ecological discourse too, we can observe these changes in temporal semantics. In view of the urgency of many problem complexes, particularly in the case of the accelerating climate crisis, the argument is often heard that the time window is closing rapidly, and that ‘we’ no longer have any time to wait until people are ready for fundamental solutions. Radical perspectives and strategies for changing society, which have the goal of providing fundamental solutions to problems of poverty or environmental destruction, are considered too slow and too time-consuming, and therefore useless. Reformists promise a more rapid solution, since they can form alliances with those interests which are currently powerful. That should make it possible to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, or to mobilise investments for the generation of solar energy on the basis of state regulation and support, using the tools of the market. This would be the foundation for the strategy of green capitalism or a Green New Deal: in realisation of their self-interest, the owners of capital would see the necessity of pursuing an environmentally friendly investment strategy. The interests of the owners of large fortunes in profit would ultimately dovetail with those of the common good, with no conscious plan or political strategy for radical change – which would after all only provoke massive resistance.

Time becomes a political factor. Evidently, the timeframe pattern is reversing. Reforms are being seen as providing rapid and determined measures, since they can be connected to broad complexes of interest, and will not spark resistance through their radical intent. By contrast, the concept of reform in the history of the left has had a twofold target: it has challenged, first, the apocalyptic expectation of the revolution as being someday inevitable, with the implication that we therefore need not bother

changing things in the interval; and second, the revolutionary impatience which expects that on the day after the revolution, all problems will have been solved with one blow. Paradoxically, both assumptions are similar, in spite of their juxtaposition. For with this latter radical attitude too, one might justify waiting until the revolution, or fighting for the revolution only as a transcendental event, while criticising any work for small improvements in the framework of the existing system, thus contributing to upholding precisely that existing system. Only if an improvement of concrete conditions with the goal of a fundamental transformation is conveyed will it appear to be acceptable. The orientation towards a revolution promises the opportunity to step out of the linear progression of time, and to halt its progress. “The consciousness of exploding the continuum of history is peculiar to the revolutionary classes in the moment of their action. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar” (Benjamin 1940: n.pag.). Benjamin sees the metaphor for that in the fact that during the July Revolution in Paris, shots were taken at a number of clocks on church steeples, in order to stop the progress of time. Revolutions create a moratorium, and thus the conditions under which societal relations can be reordered in such a way as to enable the avoidance of the hitherto familiar crises: unemployment, economic crises, destruction of resources, prevention of democracy, or the destruction of its institutions.

The expectations thus associated with revolution contain a number of problems. In fact, revolutions do not spring up as quickly as revolutionary determination would have them do. The question thus arises as to how to use the time that will elapse prior to such an event. In expectation of the future revolutionary struggle, one possibility is to refuse to recognise the many possibilities for change that may exist for mitigating the hardships of life in the here and now. Moreover, everyday life and its problems are simply ignored in light of the bright promise of the future, or else they are reduced to the simple and in fact cynical realisation that capitalist conditions are what they are, and that it is impossible to hope for a good, fair, satisfying life under them. Thus does this critically intended materialist approach become a positivist affirmation in a sense like: ‘After all, we are materialists, and we know that the relations of forces are what they are’. Of course that is not entirely wrong, for in fact an expectation that life in today’s world might be lived and experienced as meaningful, fair and free could

be seen as raising the danger of false reconciliation. Accordingly, suggestions and practices for reform are often naïve, since they suggest that all you need is commitment, goodwill, good ideas, well thought out and viable concepts, and the participation of many, and change will indeed come.

According to a further argument, the preparation of the revolution and the implementation of revolutionary action release a logic of their own, which can rapidly slide into instrumentalism; while not entirely ignoring everyday life and social relations, one nonetheless tends to one-sidedly view all problems and all persons solely under the aspect of their usefulness for the grand event that is to come. That is almost inevitably tied to a devaluation of many individuals. Those who support the revolutionary goals lay claim to a privileged position; on the one hand, they claim the epistemological privilege of knowing how society develops and how its problems can be solved. Beyond that moreover, revolutionaries support the common good, they are self-sacrificing and determined to implement it. The others represent only particular interests, prevent any fundamental solution to problems, or do not understand the historical mission. Now, that is not wrong per se. Individuals who support fundamental, long-term transformations do in fact develop a special knowledge, and do in fact represent universalist goals. In many cases however, these are no longer placed into any relationship to the goals of other people, and to the alternatives they embody. It thus becomes possible to see individuals in a historical-philosophical sense as mere means to an end. With a shift in the revolutionary process, this can apply to revolutionaries themselves as well, if their positions come to be considered as representing particular interests, and as treason to the common goals. Even a poor social situation can in this way be evaluated as supportive for one's own goals. One may believe that this oppressive situation can be rendered even more oppressive by means of the spiral of struggle with the forces which the revolution seeks to eliminate, a struggle carried out by ever more violent means. This may lead to great political success, but, unlike the claim often made in revolutionary theory, that is then the case not for logical, but rather for contingent reasons. If both forces use the means of violence, this could also set loose a dynamic which can cause great damage to the revolutionary goal. Violence become structurally formative in and of itself, since society may find itself occupied

for decades with overcoming the effects of destruction, and subsequently with reconciliation.

Third, the revolutionary process itself carries with it the potential for great conflict and violence. Since revolution interrupts the normal course of societal reproduction, it must arrive at rapid solutions. Those who have organized the revolutionary process may be overwhelmed by the rapidity of events and the multiplicity of demands. Their resources in personnel and their knowledge are too thin. The expectations that everything will be solved as a result of the situation itself, that the revolution will, in its revolutionary processes, create the appropriate people in sufficient proportions, and that the appropriate skills will emerge from them just as spontaneously, is false. On the one hand, one should not deny the fact that revolutions themselves represent relationships which create their own potential for action. But often, revolutionary processes remain limited to a few cities or regions. Moreover, the skills important for the reorganisation of complex processes of production, distribution and decision-making, and for the establishment of long-term routines, do not necessarily emerge rapidly.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a long-established tradition may be so powerful that it can limit the creativity of the revolutionary situation. The German Social Democrats fought for so long for the right to vote and for parliamentarism that in 1918 and 1919, when more than that was possible, they rejected the possibility of fighting for more, and held fast to their obsolete catalogue of goals, only to have the bourgeoisie in German society deprive them even of that parliamentarism. “One could claim that the German Social Democrats, up to the moment when they seized political power, gave precious little thought to the ascertainment of a positive formula for the socialist organization of the national economy, and hence to the practical solution to the question of nationalization” (Korsch 1980 [1919]: 161). In other words, what is meant by revolution does not occur simply without further ado. On the ‘day after’, solutions to the pressing problems will still have to be found. The number of problems will then however not be smaller, but rather greater, and there will not necessarily be enough people and enough skills available. Revolutions too need plenty of time; they may come rapidly, but then they have to reorganise the relation of forces. On the other hand, the revolution has to bear the responsibility for such a reorganisation, and is thus in danger of discrediting itself. A fair-minded person, according to Kant in *The Contest*

*of Faculties*, could never decide to make a revolution, in view of the misery and the atrocities it engendered, even if one might hope to be able to carry it through happily the second time. Indeed, Marx too criticised the model of the *political* revolution, and argued for an orientation towards a process of social revolution. There were two reasons for that critique: First, in the context of the conception of political revolution, action appears as a relationship of political will. Moreover, this thus yields the expectation of being able to force through by political and legal means changes which can only occur in the form of social processes. As a result, the political revolution becomes authoritarian. “The more developed and the more comprehensive is the political understanding of a nation, the more the proletariat will squander its energies – at least in the initial stages of the movement – in senseless, futile uprisings that will be drowned in blood. Because it thinks in political terms, it regards the *will* as the cause of all evils and *force* and the *overthrow of a particular* form of the state as the universal remedy” (Marx 1972 [1844]: 407). However, as soon as the organising activity of socialism begins, when “its soul emerges, when it shows that it is an end in itself, then socialism throws its political cover aside” (ibid.: 409). However, Marx did not systematically think through this relationship between the political and social revolutions, although there are numerous references to it in his texts on the Paris Commune.

In view of the enormous challenges and dangers connected with a revolution, social democratic intellectuals developed a concept of gradualist evolution. In their description of the economic democracy discussions within the SPD, Fritz Vilmar and Karl-Otto Sattler (1978: 8f) pointedly recalled these social democratic concepts. They claimed to pursue an evolutionary and gradualist strategy. By means of reforms, the introduction of new elements of control, the continual supervision of economic power, and with the expansion of the rights of codetermination and self-determination, a transformation of the existing economic order was to be achieved. The authors distinguished this gradualist position from the revolutionary total solution on the one hand, but also from the position of “only carrying out marginal corrections on a day-to-day basis and without any perspective” (ibid.), and without pursuing the goal of overcoming capitalist society. This is to occur step-by-step, with each next step in the context of a dynamic concept becoming one that could never appear as the conclusive one, but

always as the necessary preparation for a more demanding socio-political concept. Associated with such a gradualist concept is evidently an assumption that is not plausible in and of itself: Vilmar and Sattler apparently assumed that gradual reforms would enable learning processes, so that institutional changes might be tried out. That would permit the various groups of the population to familiarise themselves with such changes, dissolve old ties of interest, and tie their interests to new regulations and institutions, in order to re-examine preferences and create new ones. As a result, the changes would ultimately obtain increasingly strong support, and thus the relations of power would gradually be changed. This approach appears as a kind of trick, in which a very slow step-by-step process is to advance toward radical systemic change. The expectations of these authors were that each decision would lead to 'boundary shifts' and self-association of the actors, which would become the premises for further decisions, so that in the process of marginal changes, certain threshold values of societal reproduction might be transcended.

The objections to these theses are obvious. When such a process is stated as being evolutionary, the speculation is that it will be carried out behind the backs of the actors, as a process of non-intentional effectiveness. This involves a curious lack of public openness and democratic discussion of strategy, and threatens, de facto, to abandon the process to the technocrats. For inasmuch as people at all levels are actually involved in the economic reproduction process, it is obvious that they will not only determine the goals, but also the speed of the reform processes. At the same time however, the basic goal has already been established, and must only be administered appropriately and rationally, with political means. Thus, the issue is to motivate people to take these steps. This constitutes a teaching relationship towards people. Hence, the process is first of all precisely not designed as an open one. However, it is marked by trust that each next incremental improvement will lead to a change of the whole. That is a very questionable kind of trust: "Whether the 'next step' bears within it the potential for the whole, or whether it strangles and prevents that, can always only be ascertained afterwards; and to imagine that the 'next step' will without question and in fact extend to cover the whole, basically requires a full dose of Hegelian metaphysics, which, after all, continues to

show its effect in Marx, in other words, I would say, requires a solid belief in the world spirit” (Adorno 2008 [1964]: 9, translation PH). The conception of the next steps is thus a special kind of burden, for it is challenged not only by the countervailing forces, but also by the factor of resignation, and – in the name of realism – of adaptation to existing conditions. Adorno himself evidently did not imagine any linear concept of the emancipatory course. He argued for an open course, which he evidently saw as a series of aleatoric processes. Emancipation at the world-historical level has long since been possible. That is what gives reforms their special priority of place, for each is necessary and makes sense, but each must also be carried out in such a way that it might be the last one, the one which immediately brings about the condition of reconciled humankind. Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote that, in view of the multiplications of things and of the forces of society, control by the few was no longer in accordance with the times, for all were capable of exercising that control. All people “finally learned to forgo power. Enlightenment consummates and abolishes itself when the closest technical objectives reveal themselves to be the most distant goal already attained” (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002 [1947]: 33).

Second, we need to take into account that even in processes which are conceived as gradualist, rational and conscious, decisions which develop step-by-step could themselves again lead to unforeseen and unintended changes. In order to convince and win over possible opponents to a project, changes will be made in that project by way of compromise, causing it over time to assume an entirely different character (cf. Bachrach/Baratz 1977: 77). Preferences and meta-preferences may shift in the course of reforms; the expansion of state operated social systems may ultimately strengthen the desire for a self-determined life to such an extent that the bureaucratic administration of insurances against life’s risks itself appears as a problem.

Third, interestingly enough, precisely the activity of those who wield power and use it to oppose the gradualist reform strategies remain outside the scope of the arguments for a reformist strategy. However, these powerful and dominant groups are not stupid, to put it bluntly; they too understand the gradualist strategy as one that is directed against their interests. They play ‘global intellect’, and try to drive a wedge between the goal and the single steps, and to intervene in the process in such a way that it does

not proceed in an evolutionary and gradualist manner. Certainly, these powerful groups will be weakened in the course of this process, as some of them are pried out of the power block. But those who have the most to lose will seek to prevent precisely such a development. The relations of forces since the 1970s have proceeded in such a way that precisely the foundations of evolutionary reform strategies have been weakened. While Vilmar and Sattler expect an evolutionary strategy to produce a gradual reconstruction, neo-liberals and system theoreticians have developed a concept of evolution, and imposed it upon society, which opposes any rationally planned strategy for the reconstruction and steering of the whole of society. Thus has a counter-reformist concept been developed which not only blocks all expectations which speculate on a gradualist reform strategy, but in fact reverses them. Such expectations include the security guaranteed by the welfare state and participation in it, economic framework planning, investment control, expansion of communal economy and politically controlled areas of the economy, and hence ultimately the creation of the primacy of democratically legitimate policy over the logic of profit of the private economy. The concept of a gradualist evolutionary development toward socialism, as it existed in parts of the social democratic movement and in the unions during the mid-1970s, has been disappointed just as much as has the radical, cultural revolutionary concept pursued by large parts of the non-dogmatic New Left during the post-1968 period. Such disappointments may be one of the reasons why the Social Democrats and the unions hardly see socialism as the goal of their political efforts, but rather as having the significance of one respectable ethical value among many others. Therefore, it is certainly appropriate to note that the Social Democrats have not yet theoretically reflected upon the defeat of the reform strategy. I would like to emphasise that evolutionary concepts too are part of the societal relation of forces, and that the ruling bloc is mobilising against them. However, since such evolutionary concepts are precisely not associated with concepts of political struggle, but that it is instead often assumed that the decisive factor is the logical plausibility and the economic and political feasibility of such a proposal, an analytical gap arises which is fatal to further reflection within the left.

## 2. The perspective of transformation

The contradiction between revolution and reform has been seen by many as unsatisfactory, because it fails to take into account the complexity of real emancipatory processes which have again and again split the left, and have contributed to the fact that no overarching emancipatory perspective has been developed. There have been repeated attempts to overcome this contradiction. Rosa Luxemburg thus spoke of revolutionary pragmatism (*‘revolutionäre Realpolitik’*), while the Austro-Marxists, and particularly Max Adler, attempted to counteract the split in the European workers’ movement. Also, considerations which have led to the foundation of unified socialist parties, or of industrial unions, were due to the realisation that a split in the emancipatory forces along the axis of revolution vs. reform would ultimately only serve the ruling forces. Hence, the attempt has for some time been undertaken to circumvent and reject this contradiction, which has evidently again and again arisen in everyday political processes, between a radical, revolutionary break and the gradualist, evolutionary transformation. Lately, there has been talk about radical pragmatism or radical reformism. Even if we, again following Kant, were to decide on rational grounds that we didn’t want to make a revolution, in view of the practical costs, the moral element in human nature would nonetheless ensure that the desire for revolution would continue to exist: first, because people have the right to give themselves that civic republican constitution which they themselves see as appropriate; and second because only such self-constitutionalisation would have the legal and moral standing that would prevent aggressive wars, and ultimately war itself, which could thus no longer prevent the progress of humankind (cf. Kant 1968 [1798]: 86). The desire for revolution is accordingly a constituent factor of bourgeois society. That society cannot, however, succeed in becoming identical with itself, and in bringing itself to a conclusion at the end of its history. The concept of progress that Kant takes up will always, in a contradictory manner, incorporate both elements. The first is the linear progression of time, an eternal progression, in accord with that bourgeois self-consciousness which believes that actually everything has already been achieved, and only this or that little thing still needs to be improved. Thus does everything continually change, modernise and progress in order to

remain the way it is. Second, however, there is the logic of the break, the holding up of time, the renunciation of constant change so that at long last everything can become different at once. Progress which can only occur in and through society, as Adorno says, still does not dissolve in that society, but rises above it. Progress must take place within the logic of progress itself. “Progress means: to step out of the magic spell, even out of the spell of progress, which is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues. In this way it could be said that progress occurs where it ends” (Adorno 2003 [1962]: 134). Kant and Adorno, in their reflections, point out that there will always be revolutions, and that they are a factor in the bourgeois logic of progress itself. But as the experiences of the French and Russian Revolutions show, it is not enough to wait for the event of the revolution. Rather, it is necessary to anticipate what is connected with it, and which consequences it will have – and that not so much in the sense of a counterrevolutionary project as to avoid all those potential tendencies which may endanger the goal of a fundamental emancipation of the individual.

There are, I think, three arguments in favour of searching for an alternative between revolution and gradualist reform. First, it makes no sense to wait for change until the point when the change of power has been achieved. The revolution is, in contradiction to Benjamin’s metaphor, not a shot at the clock on the church steeple, with the goal of halting the progress of time. We have not succeeded in replacing the obsolete religious manner of calculating time with a new one by means of political decisions. To take a different metaphor: the ship can’t dock; it has to be rebuilt at sea. After the revolution, the societal problems which gave rise to it will continue to exist. These problems which are generated ‘today’ must be solved. For that reason, it makes sense to restrict the data-setting, fact-creating power of the rulers as much as possible, and thus to reduce the quantity of baggage they will leave behind, which will burden all future progress in the self-determined formulation of a common manner of living for a long time to come, and even bring that progress to a halt. Moreover, it makes sense to solve the problems today that need to be solved today. Why should we wait? What about the people living in the interim period? By what right and based on what principles can we deny them the opportunity of improving their situation right now?

Second, it makes sense to initiate improvements now, because seen from their vantage point, the limitations of contemporary society become more visible. Two things are becoming recognisable: first, the fact that improvements are continually colliding with the limits of the power of dominant interests, and cannot be implemented in the manner intended as long as these relations of power are not fundamentally changed; and second, that the procedures according to which improvements could be carried out are constantly being hampered. Even democratic incrementalism will, as Habermas (1973: 93f) wrote with a view of late capitalism, be confronted with powerful rejection. If however democratic reforms were successfully to be implemented, they would constitute a higher point of departure for any attempt at building an emancipated society.

It is, thirdly, necessary to anticipate the future by means of the practices that are already occurring today. We must thus also anticipate which practices and which attitudes would, in case of major changes in societal relations, have authoritarian, anti-emancipatory consequences. Thus, improvements would also carry with them the possibility of trying things out, recognising weaknesses and contradictions, and getting to know practically and intellectually the dangers and risks of emancipatory projects, and developing the capacities for dealing with them. This involves technical and economic skills and demands as much as it does imply democratic competences, of which many hold the expectation that they might and should, even today, be realised in daily intercourse with one another. This anticipation of practice and knowledge is, not least of all, that which enhances the plausibility of fundamental change and can motivate us to strive for it in the first place.

Encouraged by such considerations, there have in recent decades been repeated attempts to develop a corresponding concept of emancipatory transformation which could not be blocked by the traditional concepts of reform or revolution. Even the older representatives of the critical theory addressed this question. In the above quoted essay on progress, Adorno (2003 [1962]: 138) emphasises that the devastation caused by the progress of the conquest of nature can ultimately only be repaired by the forces of progress. These two concepts of progress – i.e. conquest of nature and devastation – communicate not only in the rejection of the ultimate misfortune, but even in “any current form of the reduction of the continuing suffering” (ibid.). Particularly Adorno, who never left any room for doubt

that what needed to be overcome was not only capitalism, but also, more fundamentally, the natural historical phase of human development itself, repeatedly stressed the necessity for improving concrete conditions of life, because freedom, he maintained, cannot be experienced within the constraints of quasi-natural societal narrowness. “If one were, as it were, for the sake of the purity of class relations, to intend to undermine these things [improvements in work processes and situations of life as a result of union struggles – AD], he would be at once a fool and a reactionary, and indeed a reactionary for the simple reason that any kind of independent insight and autonomy is tied to a certain kind of freedom from the most urgent daily needs, which freedom can be provided precisely by way of such improvements” (Adorno 2008 [1964]: 104f, translation PH).

### **3. Transformative strategies**

In order to avoid the problems which the concepts and strategies of reform and revolution have historically implied, a number of proposals have in recent times been made, at the centre of which the concepts of radical transformation, radical pragmatism and radical reformism have stood. These concepts have attempted to critically transcend the alternative of revolution or reform by overcoming existing relationships of domination and exploitation, and the causes of societal crises, through openness of historical processes, and through goal orientation without authoritarian or lecturing paternalism. At the same time, emancipatory action is conveyed to existing societal apparatuses which takes concrete everyday problems and conflicts seriously, and makes reform proposals without losing oneself within them and failing to take account of the relations of forces. That is the central difference to approaches (cf. Dieterich 2006; Albert 2006) which consider on the basis of theoretical models how socialism might function, without worrying too much about how to get there and how people are to formulate the path to it. To a certain extent, individuals have no choice but to fit themselves into a model which is considered functional, and to implement that model. In the following, I would like to present three conceptions of transformation. The scope of the concepts is different, and in the manner of application not yet in any sense coherent.

### 3.1 Socio-ecological transformation (Dieter Klein)

Dieter Klein (2010; cf. also Reißig 2009) argues for a second major transformation, which he sees as an economic-social structural transformation, analogous to the first Great Transformation from the subsistence to the market economy in the eighteenth century, as described by Karl Polanyi. This second transformation is a dual transformation: that in the state socialist societies, and that in the capitalist societies, each of which is confronted with its own problems. Klein notes a number of deep-seated problems that place modern society at a crossroads. Hitherto, the left has not adapted itself sufficiently to this situation, or developed appropriate suggestions for an alternative societal project, that of democratic socialism, to be brought into the discussion in the “arena of intellectual-political struggle for hegemony” (Klein 2010). According to Klein, a number of different development paths are emerging: neo-liberal business as usual, neo-liberalism combined with state intervention, post-neo-liberal capitalism based on a new ecologically and socially defined social contract, a de-civilised capitalism, or, last, an emancipatory transformation. Democratic socialism is understood as a transformational process which will be neither a revolution nor a mere series of reforms (Klein 2010: 4). A large number of aspects define this project: individual freedom, meaningful work, high-quality health services, world peace, etc. The central issues are ending the orientation towards economic growth, developing new technologies, and the subsequent transition to a new mode of living.

Although the approach is far-reaching, several central issues can be identified. The first problem has more to do with the approach of Karl Polanyi, to which Dieter Klein refers with his own approach. Polanyi (1978), in his book on *The Great Transformation*, fails to provide any precise definition for the term ‘transformation’. It is not clear whether this process is a transition to a self-regulating market, or a process in which society ultimately begins to protect itself against such a market. In the latter case, the Great Transition would primarily indicate that society is withdrawing labour power, the soil, and money from the grip of the logic of the market. This occurs by means of a number of measures which Polanyi already sees emerging, particularly in the work of Robert Owen: fixed work times, good pay and living conditions, universal education for children and young people, and moral education for the workers. Since the 1930s, this has been

generalised by the welfare state. What is considered socialist, then, is the hemming in of the market by the institutions of parliamentary-representative democracy. Thus, the term 'transformation' involves a degree of uncertainty. Historically, it is not clear what exactly is being identified as 'transformation': the process of commodification, or that of de-commodification. Moreover, the processes of transformation themselves are not explained: neither the process that leads to the embedding of the market, nor that with which society is to protect itself. Hence, it is ultimately not clear in what manner this process of transformation is itself to be organised over the long term as an intentional, democratically constituted process.

The second is a question of diagnosis i.e., a description of the crossroads after 300 years of capitalism. My objection is that bourgeois society bears the potential for such an emancipation within it, not only at present, but long since, but that it repeatedly engenders such crossroad constellations. The catastrophe, as Adorno says, took place historically with the state ordered racist mass murder of Europe's Jews, with the Second World War and with the use of the atomic bomb, events which destroyed the limits set by civilisation. These tools are still at the disposal of the ruling structure, and are an inevitable point of reference and the determinant of any further emancipatory perspective. At the same time, the potential elements for a free and self-determined mode of living have long since existed. In other words, Klein's proposal tends toward a normative model in stages, with an established timeline, while the contingency of the reforms themselves is not sufficiently incorporated into the considerations, any more than are radical developmental thrusts. Klein expects, as a medium-term perspective, "in the most favourable case" a shift of relations of power toward the left. This would be an eco-social reform alternative within the framework of capitalism, supported by the "spirit of saving the world" of the committed bourgeoisie and the critical elites. Radical activists who put pressure on these bourgeois forces and would like to step up the speed of change, have no place in this model. But of course, the question arises as to whether, without such pressure, "space for the democratic implementation of socialist elements and tendencies" (Klein 2010: 3) would in fact be opened up. The concept of a crossroads, taken from Karl Polanyi, is misleading, and has an objectivist tendency, as if such a constellation existed independently of the practice of the participants. It suggests, in contradiction to

its evolutionary theoretical justification, a free choice in this or that direction. That choice does exist, but it is always a choice that emerges from the concrete constellation of forces.

A third question involves the state and the political realm. This area is a blind spot in considerations that have been voiced to date on the second transformation. Some formulations by Dieter Klein suggest that the economic sphere, which, as he sees it, has under capitalism increasingly disembedded itself from society, must be brought back under the control of the political sphere. That raises the question as to how the state itself must be constituted so as to permit it to control the economy. If the state is strengthened in terms of its competences, its revenues, and its possibilities for intervention, would that not also strengthen the logic of statism? Would a state, even with the means of the general laws, monetary control measures and an administration controlled and supervised solely by the government, be able to politically re-embed the economy? How would the state be restructured? Would that happen at the level of the nation-state, or would a Europeanised and globalised economy be forced to engender an appropriate form of European or transnational statehood? Which actors would carry this out? Moreover, there is the question as to how far democracy extends. Are the present forms of periodic electoral participation in representative legislatures by means of parties, and a public sphere controlled by private owners and party politicians, enough to effect such a thoroughgoing transformation? Could the wage dependent and consuming population be permitted to participate, in the context of economic democracy, in the processes of decision-making on investments, processes of production, or products? In other words, would the economy not have to become a public and political sphere?

Fourth, the reference to the first great transformation concerning some deep-seated forms of domination is insufficient: the instrumental control over nature is a determining characteristic of millennia old practices of rule, since the time of the ancient civilisations. That includes directly, too, the relationship of domination in a societal division of labour between manual and mental labour. The formation and performance of the gender of individuals too is a characteristic which extends much further back and is much more deeply rooted than modern capitalism. In this respect, a transformation will have to be conceived in a more radical manner.

### **3.2 Transformation of the capitalist state (Nicos Poulantzas)**

If, under Dieter Klein's concept of transformation, the state is to play a minor role, it is certainly at centre stage according to the ideas of Nicos Poulantzas, both at the level of the transformation and as a strategy. When Nicos Poulantzas speaks of radical transformation toward democratic socialism, he is primarily looking to a restructuring of the state, so that his approach in the first instance seems to be much more modest. The concepts that existed in the workers' movement are in his view inadequate. Poulantzas sees on the one hand social democracy with its statist orientation pursuing and implementing reforms through the means of the state, while all the while he is uneasy about the democratic demands and participation of the broader population; and on the other, the Leninist/Stalinist tradition, which seeks to smash the state. Even if he himself argues for the withering away of the state, he nonetheless has his doubts that this could be possible in a model of revolutionary seizure of power, dual rule, and a concentration on councils and direct grassroots democracy. He criticises the fact that under this conception, a parallel political power structure would emerge, with, on the one side, the state and its bureaucrats as the instrument of the previously ruling bourgeois class, and on the other, the emancipatory forces, whose goal is self-management. Social movements remain external to the state, with no understanding for the internal contradictions and conflicts within it; by taking possession of it, in order to use it to restructure society, they integrate themselves into it, and thus do not change it from within. Ultimately, the result is an undemocratic statist transformation from which the state emerges strengthened. Poulantzas himself wants to initiate a radical transformation of the state, by expanding and deepening the freedoms and institutions of representative democracy, tying them to the development of forms of direct democracy and centres of self-management. Poulantzas does not see the continued existence of the institutions of representative democracy as an unfortunate remnant, but rather as a necessary condition of democratic socialism. He does however see the problem that with an expansion of democracy, the opponents of the process, too, will obtain more possibilities to "boycott the democratic socialist experiment, or else brutally intervene to put an end to it" (Poulantzas 2002: 292). With these dangers in view, the expansion of democracy is to become possible by means of broad social movements.

However, they must be tied to the transformation of the state. Within the state, effective centres of resistance and power must be formed, developed and reinforced, so that the internal relations of forces of the state apparatus can be changed, and effective ruptures and displacements in these relations of forces can emerge for the benefit of the subjugated. The transformation process is thus open for contingencies resulting from the actions of social movements. That does not mean however that the transforming practice can only take place within state institutions; rather, the key is to develop movements and potentials for direct democracy which would be linked to changes in the relation of forces in the realm of the state, and hence the transformation of its apparatus. “This transformation must be accompanied by the unfolding of new forms of direct grassroots democracy and the expansion of networks and centres of self-administration. A mere transformation of the state apparatus and the development of representative democracy would be unable to elude statism. However there is also a flip side: even the one-sided and unmistakable shift of the centre of power to a movement of self-administration might in the short or long-term fail to prevent a failure, i.e. a technical bureaucratic statism and the authoritarian confiscation of power by the experts” (Poulantzas 2002: 290, translation PH).

Poulantzas’ approach too raises questions. He concentrates on the transformation of the state, yet the connection of this transformation with the totality of societal relationships remains unclear. First, Poulantzas assumes that the deeply rooted practices of domination – i.e., the separation of mental and manual labour, national divisions, or the gender dichotomy – will be concentrated in the state. However, it is not clear how a transformation of the state which involved a change in the form of domination might affect these deep-seated practices of domination in the foundations of society itself. Second, much depends on social movements, but he cannot explain how these emerge and remain on a permanent basis to support and maintain a long-lasting process of transformation of the state. Social movements have their own dynamic, which does not abide by the master plan of a long-term restructuring, but rather runs in phases. These movements become active in favour of accelerated measures, they change their issues and their forms of action, and they dissolve themselves again. If they massively mobilise for certain goals, they may run into conflict with other actors, who may also desire the transformation, but who have

other interests and priorities. That, thirdly, raises the question as to how the relationship between the state apparatus, parties and social movements can be democratically regulated. The logic of action will differ, in spite of shared goals: parties will be more likely to represent the logic of representative democracy and state authority and society in general; movements will concentrate on their mobilisable issues, and in so doing may transcend even the rules of the transformational process. Fourth, Poulantzas largely ignores processes of democratic restructuring of the economy. The only reference is to processes of economic self-management, but essential questions regarding democratic decision-making in workplaces and municipalities, the coordination of production and services, the participation of consumers, the orientation of economic activity towards sustainability, and the development of new collective life modes remain unanswered. Here too, the question arises as to how social movement processes can be made permanent at the level of economic self-management, and coordinated by means of state decision-making processes.

### **3.3 Radical reformism and the mode of life (Joachim Hirsch)**

Finally, I would like to mention the approach of Joachim Hirsch, who does not speak directly of transformation, but rather of radical reformism. Like Dieter Klein, he picks up on considerations of Antonio Gramsci's regarding civil society, which Poulantzas, oddly, ignores, and calls for changing these, with the goal of democratisation, in order to "fight against the dominant concepts of order and development in society" (Hirsch 2005: 230). The state is not an instrument, but rather an "institutional expression of fundamental societal relations of forces" (ibid.). For this reason, he says, these relations of forces cannot be changed with its help. It does not have the power to control and supervise society; it is the societal structures that must be changed. However, alternative forms of socialisation will not be developed quasi-automatically out of bourgeois capitalist society. What is needed is conscious action, "which must be directed against the dominant social structures, political forms of institutionalisation, and the shaping of subjects" (ibid.), involving new forms of production and living, organisational contexts independent of existing institutional structures, as well as of the state and parties, and the creation of an independent public sphere. Hirsch uses the concept of reform to indicate that societal changes cannot

be implemented by means of state power, but rather represent a long-term and gradual process of change of consciousness and behaviour through which societal relations of forces are gradually transformed. In particular, that involves changes in civil society: possibilities of independent discourse, the processing of experience, cultural revolutionary modes of living, and the contents of consciousness. According to Hirsch, this reformism is radical because it is not characterised either by particular material goals or by the radicalism of its advance, but rather by the fact that it breaks through capitalist social forms, i.e. the forms of the dominant division of labour, societal production, family and gender relationships, consumerism, and particularly the politics of the separation of the private and the public, of politics and economy, of rulers and ruled, and of citizens and foreigners (cf. *ibid.*: 229).

Hirsch's considerations regarding radical reformism expand the spectrum of reformist activity considerably. In addition to fundamental economic parameters, technological development, economic policy measures, the restructuring of the state apparatus, and a new relationship between that apparatus and society, there now also emerge long-term changes in civil society itself involving the societal division of labour, gender relations, family practices, and the public sphere. However, like Klein, Hirsch sees the struggle for hegemony primarily as a mere change of consciousness, and of the concepts of societal order and development. That is clearly too little, for hegemony also means a material change in everyday habits within a new organisation of culture. His ideas can certainly be considered anti-statist, for – unlike Poulantzas – he calls for a kind of parallel, 'independent' political structure. In order to avoid the obvious consequence of a state rejectionist abstentionism, he stresses that political intervention is unavoidable, since the state structure codifies and guarantees social compromises and rights which have been won by struggle. Accordingly, the state is not only the expression of the societal relations of forces, but rather – as Poulantzas and Gramsci argued – it is itself such a relation; how, by whom and which apparatus makes policy, which interests are to be taken into account, which binding decisions are to be made, to what extent the public sphere can be supervised – all that must necessarily become part of the transformational process. However, Hirsch does not pursue that contradiction to the end, but rather remains appellative: political action carried out in reference to

the state may not, he states, mean the adoption of statist forms of political action and behaviour (ibid.: 232). But it is precisely this which is the area of conflict. We are not entering the arena of the state from the outside so as to then contaminate ourselves through political involvement, but rather, quite the reverse, we have always been within the state as a societal relation, and the point is to transform that state in order to dismember the societal relationship called 'the state'. Public expressions of will, parties and parliaments are state apparatuses, yet Hirsch does not clarify their relationship to the social movements. Apparently, unlike Poulantzas, he sees them as a regrettable remainder. By contrast, Hirsch sees the possibility of democracy as being structurally rooted in capitalist relations, and he sees the expansion of democracy as important (ibid.: 27); democracy may not necessarily have to be practised within the existing forms of representative democracy, but a radical reformism must say what forms would then be better suited. If democracy, in capitalist relations, is structurally rooted in the exchange of commodities, it should moreover be considered that when capitalist forms are pushed back by radical reforms, the foundations of democracy too could be weakened. Thus, Hirsch's state and party-critical ideas lead to a series of internal contradictions and unanswered questions. Since we cannot always simply place our hopes in the social movements, but rather must seek an initiative for the transformation of society at all levels – i.e. also the possible initiatives of parties, unions or even individuals within the state apparatus (remember the Revolution of the Carnations in Portugal) – the relationship of political and social democracy must be further deepened, which raises the question as to how societal formation of opinion occurs, and how transformational processes are initiated and implemented in a generally binding manner.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The discussion of socialist transformation has in recent years received important impulses; nonetheless, it is still in its initial stages. Accordingly, a large number of problems and contradictions which must be discussed further have been ascertained. First of all, this involves the evaluation of such concepts as reform and revolution. In particular, the state of know-

ledge about the practices and results of reforms is fairly low. The scope of the concept of transformation, too, needs to be clearly defined. Which areas need to be transformed, and how deep must the transformation be? Second is the dimension of time: fast or slow, gradual, continual, linear or broken up – and the connection between these rhythms. Third, there is the question of societal power, for success does not depend only on the quality of suggestions for reform or concepts of transformation. Fourth, there is the question of the relationship of evolution on the one hand and consciousness, rationality, and moral and ethical concepts on the other. Fifth, there is the question of the possibilities of pursuing long-term reforms in and through the state, and the question of a transformation of the state itself. Sixth, there is the question of democracy in the form of existing institutions and procedures, their expansion, and the connection of the democratic formation of intent with the deep-seated laws which determine the development of the formation of capitalist society. As I see it, there are more questions than answers. Moreover, there is the epistemological question upon which Adorno always insisted: are the contradictions which have emerged historically between the concepts of reform and revolution not themselves objective and historically rational, inasmuch as they are, under bourgeois capitalist conditions, subject to a contradiction which cannot be resolved even with the best theory, but rather represent a further motive force to change these relationships? The dialectic of reform and revolution cannot merely be put to rest; the term ‘transformation’ is not the logical solution to an existing societal contradiction. Rather, the concept of transformation can contribute to unfolding this dialectic itself, and giving it shape, so that the contradiction can be processed. The concept of transformation is thus oriented not toward the false reconciliation of the contradiction, nor toward logical disambiguation with no theoretical solution. Rather, it defines the field in which these contradictions and questions themselves can be discussed with conscious and strategic intent. For, independent of specific problems, what is lacking is a strategic discussion in which the commonality and the cohesion of all emancipatory efforts can be created, so that the transformation which is seen as necessary can be initiated by means of a number of concepts.

Translation by Phil Hill (Berlin)

- 1 Unevenness between regions can easily be seen in Bolivia, where they have a retarding effect on the rebuilding of the country. Here, I am referring not only to the political conflicts between the indigenous people of the Alto Plano on the one hand and the big landowners in the lowlands on the other, but rather, too, to the conflicts over the question of resource use between indigenous groups and the government. In Venezuela, it can be seen that managers and business people, when they leave the country, often take with them the knowledge of processes necessary to maintain the everyday operational and business activities of their companies. Moreover, within the companies, there are many, and often brutal, conflicts between leftist workers and unions on the one side, and reactionary unionists and mafia-type groups on the other, often resulting in violence. Not only for that reason is it thus important that the workers become familiar with the tasks of democratic business management long before such power struggles emerge.

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## **Abstracts**

The window of opportunity for change is closing, we are constantly being told. Will reforms come soon enough, or do we need a revolution? However, wouldn't it take too long for people to become ready for a revolution? Both concepts – reform and revolution – have long polarised the left debate, and yet both have been questioned. In this essay, I would like to show the necessity for an analysis and an evaluation of the strategic meanings of these terms. Since both have their weaknesses, I would like to propose the introduction of the term 'transformation' – not only as a third term, which might reconcile or supersede the other two, but rather in order to bring a dialectical process into motion by means of which the concepts of reform and revolution might mutually stimulate one another.

Das Fenster, in dem Veränderungen möglich sind, sei dabei, sich zu schließen, so wird uns permanent gesagt. Kommen die Reformen rechtzeitig genug oder benötigen wir eine Revolution? Oder würde es zu lange dauern, bis die Menschen zu einer Revolution bereit sind? Beide Begriffe, Reform und Revolution, haben lange Zeit die linke Debatte polarisiert,

und schließlich haben sich beide als fragwürdig erwiesen. In diesem Essay möchte ich die Notwendigkeit aufzeigen, die strategische Bedeutung beider Konzepte zu analysieren und zu evaluieren. Da diese ihre Schwächen haben, schlage ich die Einführung des Begriffs „Transformation“ vor – nicht nur als dritten Begriff, der in der Lage wäre, die beiden anderen zu versöhnen oder zu ersetzen, sondern auch, um sie in einem dialektischen Prozess in Bewegung zu bringen, damit Reform und Revolution sich gegenseitig stimulieren können.

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