

What Kind of Great Transformation?

The Imperial Mode of Living as a Major Obstacle to Sustainability Politics

The debate over a great transformation has contributed to emphasize the depth of the social-ecological crisis and the urgency of effecting far-reaching societal change.

However, it fails to provide a critical analysis of the social causes of the crisis or to properly identify the unsustainable nature of current trends.

Here the concept of the imperial mode of living steps in. It sheds light on the mechanisms through which unsustainable social relations are both reproduced and obscured. It outlines the contradictions from which, once politicized, a fundamental social-ecological transformation may emerge.

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Political and scientific debates about adequate ways to deal with the multiple crises, and particularly with the ecological crisis, remain intense. In recent years, the term *great transformation* became one of the leading concepts in sustainability science (WBGU 2011, Brand 2016, Görg et al. 2017). Obviously, its radical semantics have attracted the authors and negotiators of the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* whose headline of the *2030 Agenda's* final declaration was nothing less than *Transforming Our World* (United Nations 2015). Moreover, the metaphor of a human-made geological formation, the “Anthropocene”, has gained international attention (Crutzen 2002, Steffen et al. 2011) despite being controversial and subject to criticism (e. g., Jahn et al. 2015, Baskin 2015, Görg 2016). Like the concepts “planetary boundaries” (Rockström et al. 2009) and “ecological footprint” (Wackernagel 2009), this indicates that ideas about transformation are leaving the space of scholarly debates and entering into the wider public consciousness.

Social Relations of Power and Domination

The debate on a great transformation has indeed contributed to emphasizing the depth of the social-ecological crisis and the ur-

gency of fundamental change. However, what exactly must be changed and who could achieve the necessary transformation, often remains obscure (Brand 2016). The implicit assumption of many contributions to the debate seems to be that the overwhelming scientific evidence of the crisis, adequately communicated to the wider public and political decision-makers, works as a wake-up call that cannot be ignored.¹ Compared to communicating dramatic evidence, the critical analysis of the social mechanisms of the crisis as well as a proper identification of the forces of transformation is of secondary importance at best.

Below we will argue that a great transformation towards sustainable societies will only be successful if it is informed by a critical understanding of social relations of power and domination which, firstly, cause the social-ecological crisis, secondly, veil the causes of the crisis and, thirdly, are inherently contradictory so that they always provide cause for contestation. For these reasons, we introduce the concept of the imperial mode of living (IML). Our argument will be that this concept helps us to better understand both the persistence and spread of unsustainable patterns of production and consumption that deepen the crisis and the increasingly contradictory character of these patterns that results from their very deepening and spread. Those patterns are based on an

¹ See Beck (2011) for a critique of the “linear model of expertise” on which such an understanding of the relationship between science and policy is based. We argue that wake-up calls are easily ignored by the decision-makers to whom they are addressed, since they fall through the grid of epistemic selectivities as they are inscribed into political and economic structures. Instead, we see the transformative role of scientific concepts in excavating contradictions, informing progressive social and political forces through the analysis of power and domination, and identifying alternatives that are at the same time desirable, viable and achievable (cf. Wright 2010).

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– in principle – unlimited appropriation of the resources and labor power of both the global North and the global South, and of a disproportionate claim to global sinks (like forests and oceans in the case of CO₂). A core mechanism of the functioning of the IML – more precisely: the imperial mode of production and living – is that worldwide relationships of domination, power and exploitation remain intact and at the same time invisible, that means that they are in a way normalized within Northern societies.

The crucial contradiction is that in times of globalizing capitalism the IML means a “good living” for parts of humanity at the cost of others – which means it restricts the opportunities for a decent life for many. Moreover, it cannot be generalized in space

nally guaranteeing a certain living standard of the masses through social insurance systems and labor market regulations. Social hierarchies were stabilized through uneven access to the means of living on a global scale, a predominant understanding of well-being that focused on income and (status) consumption, as well as respective subjectivities and criteria of individual “success”.

The IML also dispersed among the population of the countries of really existing socialism and became relevant and attractive in some countries of the global South that had fast growing economies and emerging middle classes since the 1950s. Prominent examples include Argentina and Uruguay, later, with the oil boom, Venezuela, Mexico and Indonesia.

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and time: the IML depends on an external sphere from which it gets its resources and to which it can shift its social-environmental costs. Therefore, it is based on diverse processes of “externalization” (Lessenich 2018) and “separation” – between “valuable” (market) processes, commodities and wage-labor and “worthless” other forms of labor or nature (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010).

The effect of the IML enhances the conditions of material well-being for many individuals – and also for collective actors – in the global North. At the same time, its stability and hegemony occur at the cost of environmental destruction and the exploitation of labor power.

The Imperial Mode of Living in Historical Perspective

Largely a phenomenon of luxury production and consumption until the middle of the 20th century, the tendency towards the IML was generalized in the global North after World War II, which means during the Fordist phase of capitalist development. It became a mass phenomenon to the extent that the “energy available per dollar earned” increased (Huber 2013, p. 179). Societal relations were stabilized due to their environmentally and socially unsustainable character: the spread of the automobile and industrialized food, the production and use of plastics and spatial structures that privileged the separation of the workplace, living and leisure and that required increasing mobility mediated class conflict at the expense of highly unequal gender relations and destructive relations between society and nature. Fordist forms of mass production and consumption, more or less functioning social compromises and stable welfare institutions became strong and attractive directions in the societies of the global North. The nation state played a major role in constituting and stabilizing the IML by not only externally securing access to strategic resources but also inter-

Modes of production and consumption that became and are still becoming hegemonic in certain regions or countries can be generalized globally through “capillary” processes, meaning in a broken manner and with considerable gaps in time and space. These processes are decisively associated with concrete corporate strategies and interests in capital valorization, trade, investment, and geo-politics. Additionally, societal discourses about “modernity” oriented at the global North and a “good living” (that is largely unsustainable) diffuse by way of the world market, development policies and global media. “Generalization” does not mean that all people live alike, but rather that certain, deeply-rooted concepts of “good living” and of societal development are generated and reflected in the everyday life of a growing number of people, not only symbolically but also materially.

The “post-Fordist” process of capitalist globalization, starting in the 1970s and accelerating after 1990, is largely based on fossil resources and energy regimes. It reproduces itself through diverse hierarchies and forms of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, since the 1980s, the IML has increasingly spread beyond the upper classes of ever more countries of the global South to their middle classes. These developments are a key to understanding what has been called the “great acceleration” in the Anthropocene debate (Steffen et al. 2011, see also Schaffartzik et al. 2014).²

New Perspectives on Un-Sustainability

We see the explanatory value of our concept in the following points (cf. in more detail Brand and Wissen 2018):

² Cf. I.L.A. Kollektiv (2017) that shows the functioning of the imperial mode of living in the fields of digitalization, care, money and finance, knowledge and education, alimentation and agriculture, and mobility.

First of all, the IML helps us to better understand why it is so difficult to challenge the dominant logic of un-sustainability – despite the politicization of the ecological crisis up to the level of national governments and CEOs of transnational corporations. The IML is deeply inscribed into political, economic and cultural relations, it secures socio-economic well-being and status to those who benefit from it and works as a promise to all who aspire to it.

Secondly, it has the effect of making the ecological crisis more acute, just as it, however, makes it “processable” in a socially and spatially limited way. The normality of the IML noted above acts as a filter to awareness of the crisis, and as a channel for its management. At least in the global North, the ecological crisis is primarily perceived as an environmental problem and not as a comprehensive societal crisis. This promotes a certain form of public politicization that tends toward the catastrophic: the ecological crisis is a catastrophe caused by the fact that “humankind” or “human civilization” has entered the “Anthropocene” by ignoring “planetary boundaries”. Such a perspective hides the root causes – capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal dynamics – of the crisis and related power relations by presumptively putting everybody in the same place. This is what Lövbrand et al. (2015) have criticized as the “post-social ontology” of the Anthropocene discourse: it emphasizes the human dimensions of environmental change but tells us very “little about societal dynamics” (Lövbrand et al. 2015, p. 213).

Thirdly, the IML suggests a different conceptualization of “natural limits” than the debate about the Anthropocene, planetary boundaries and a great transformation (Görg 2016, p. 10). Without disregarding this debate’s important insights into the danger of crossing or already having crossed the thresholds of life support systems, we would like to emphasize that capitalism and its relationship with nature is highly uneven in time and space. The 1.5 or 2 °C goals of international climate policy may be reasonable on

ties in access to crucial resources and infrastructure systems – inequalities that may indeed be deepened by ecological crises such as climate change, but whose existence is independent from the latter (Dietz 2018). It is often through the politicization of social-ecological inequalities, rather than through alleged wake-up calls addressed to political decision-makers, that sustainable alternatives to an IML, for example, democratized energy infrastructures on the basis of renewables or cooperative forms of sustainable agriculture based on the principle of food sovereignty, are developed.³

Fourthly, the IML sheds light on the fact that the increase in productivity and material prosperity in the capitalist centers depends – not exclusively but also – on a world resource system and international division of labor that favors the global North (Hornborg 2010). Whereas in the global North the IML has contributed to safeguarding social stability – for example, by helping to keep the costs of the reproduction of labor power relatively low – it provides a hegemonic orientation of development in many societies of the global South.

Fifthly, the notion enhances our understanding of current international politics. Governments and companies of the emerging economies, particularly China, are also looking for external spheres in order to fuel their imperial mode of production and living (even if they produce commodities for the global North). We call these dynamics “eco-imperial tensions” that are likely to structure the future international political economy even more strongly.

Finally, the concept contributes to the explanation of rising right-wing and authoritarian politics. One can understand the social and political right as a force that aims to stabilize the IML. Authoritarian populism draws its strength not least from proclaiming that it is able to defend the (threatened) privileges of the middle class and to protect the working class from further social losses. It does so, of course, not by addressing the root-causes of the social inequal-

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a global scale. In many localities, however, a temperature rise of this magnitude means the destruction of living conditions. While some people, mainly in the global North, may cope with the consequences of climate change or even turn ecological damage into profit opportunities, the social-environmental costs of their mode of living are pushed on to others across space and time. Therefore, limits can be shifted both temporally and spatially, and there are several ways to cope with the ecological contradictions of capitalism in more or less exclusive ways. Furthermore, as political ecology (see Robbins 2004 for an introduction) has shown, abstract global boundaries are a far weaker incentive to politicize unsustainable relations between society and nature than social inequali-

ty, but by turning a social contradiction that is deeply rooted in the class structure of capitalist societies into a spatial conflict between natives and strangers. Those who intend to migrate to countries of the global North do so also because their living conditions have been destroyed by the IML. They simply cannot, or are not willing, to bear this anymore. Instead, they want to participate in the certain wealth and stability the IML has brought to large parts of the global North. The promise to keep these people with their fears and desires beyond the borders of the developed capitalist

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³ See the environmental justice maps on www.ejolt.org.

countries and to exclusively stabilize a mode of living against the claims of those who are no longer willing to just bear the latter's cost strengthens the extreme right.

What the Imperial Mode of Living Adds

The IML has strong lock-in effects and path dependencies that hinder social-ecological transformations. Within society, the IML is strongly rooted in the contradiction between capital and labor (that is intrinsically gendered and racialized). The need of most people to sell their labor power is not only a constitutive element of capitalism but also forces people into the IML, given that the production processes in which they generate their incomes and the availability of the commodities they need for everyday life depend on the unequal appropriation of nature and labor power on a world scale. At the same time, the IML creates opportunities, enhances mobilities, and constitutes a central mechanism for social compromise. It links people from different parts of the world in unequal ways and connects the biophysical conditions between particular regions, given the restless search for exploiting nature and for throwing its elements as “natural resources” onto the world market.

The IML does not aim to replace the concept of imperialism. Rather, it aims to substantiate Marxist theories of imperialism with a Gramscian notion of hegemony. Imperialism means that a country exerts power and domination beyond its own borders. This can be based on (a combination of) military force, economic predominance, political power or the asymmetric compromises as they have been inscribed in international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). The fact that an imperialist international order can gain a certain degree of stability despite the power, domination and/or violence on which it essentially rests, is far from self-evident. Recent years are full of examples how precarious the international order is – see, for example, Brex-

of the costs and benefits of social-environmental destruction on a world scale.

The IML concept can thus contribute to explaining why the urgently needed sustainability transformations are so difficult. Of course, it is not the only concept that does so. Its specific contribution, however, lies in a better understanding of the articulation of a globalizing political economy and its political structures in the everyday practices of firms, state organizations and ordinary people, their wishes and aspirations – but also in the increasing (and often diffuse) discomfort with the unsustainability of social and international developments and the search of many people, progressive politicians, entrepreneurs and civil society actors for alternatives.

(Research) Perspectives

To provide an outlook on future work, we want to highlight some empirical and conceptual aspects that require more research and discussion.

A first line of research is the investigation of current geopolitics and of the economic dynamics related to it. Conflicts and open wars have intensified and increased in number in many parts of the world, right-wing politics have gained strength, the “politics of externalization” seem to have become a major rationale, especially of countries and regions in the global North such as the EU. This is an important line of research. At the same time, it should be linked to developments in political forums and initiatives that are assumed to be progressive and transformative, such as the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*, the *Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)* or the *SDGs*. What is the potential of these institutions to really question and transform the imperial mode of living? Our own research (Brand et al. 2008, Wissen 2009) suggests that interna-

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it, the international politics of the United States of America's current government or the dramatic political and military dynamics in the Near East. This requires an understanding not only of the roots of international inequalities but also of the ways in which imperialist relations are normalized through their reproduction in everyday life so that the power, domination and/or violence on which they rest are rendered invisible. Here we see the specific contribution of the IML concept. As seen above, our particular interest lies in the ecological dimensions of an imperialist world order that consist in (the obscuring of) the unequal distribution

tional environmental institutions, rather than solving problems, organize the conflicts over access to natural resources and sinks. They do so not neutrally, but as the institutionalized form of international relations of power and domination that are mostly shaped in favor of capitalist core countries (although increasingly questioned by the emerging countries of the global South).

Secondly and linked to the first point: the concept of the IML challenges the perspective and political hopes of processes of ecological modernization. It is likely that the greening of capitalism (that

is indeed taking place) will occur in a highly uneven and selective way (Brand and Wissen 2018, chapters 3 and 4). Capitalism can cope with bio-physical scarcities and environmental destruction by discovering and valorizing new resources, replacing old ones and opening up new territorial and social spaces for capital accumulation. This takes place in an exclusive manner. Even in its environmentally modernized form, the IML would continue to rely on a disproportionate use of resources, sinks and labor power. That dependence would at best align itself with the specific needs of the “green” segments of this new capitalist formation. Coercive elements in the relationship with the countries of the global South would thus in no way diminish. Therefore, a research challenge is to gain a deeper understanding of initiatives of sustainability transformations and relate these to the specific functioning of the IML in various countries.

A third field of inquiry refers to the transformative potential of alternative social practices, that means the fact that people just do things differently (Jonas 2017). Brangsch (2015) argues that changing practices or habits – and enabling such changes through institutional and infrastructural framework conditions and societal discourses, or even narratives of good living – as well as the unlearning of other practices or habits constitute the core of a progressive social-ecological transformation (see also Groves et al. 2016). However, they must be combined with a strategic critique and politicization of dominant practices and their institutional and infrastructural conditions. More recently, this combination can be observed in the transformation of mobility patterns in cities like Berlin. More and more people go by bicycle and thus enhance the pressure on a car-centric urban transport infrastructure. Additionally, cyclists also organize themselves as a political force, which means that they deliberately politicize institutions and infrastructures that favor cars and disadvantage bicycles.⁴ This “interplay of unintended consequences of individual actions and the deliberate strategies of transformation” (Wright 2010, p. 300) constitutes an important factor for overcoming the IML.

Finally, the most difficult question is how sustainability transformations can be enabled and promoted. Alternative political strategies must not be reduced to lowering CO₂ concentrations, solar-energy subsidies and large-scale environmental technologies. More is involved. How are the specific relations of people and of society to nature shaped? Many experiences do already exist and should be enforced (cf. the GAIA special issue on real-world labs⁵). In the concluding chapter of our book (Brand and Wissen 2017) we sketch the “contours of a solidary mode of living”. We call for the creation of tangible alternatives in niches and to foster experiments. Progressive sustainability transformations require a comprehensive transformative perspective, that means, among other things,

strategies for and politics of a weakening of powerful actors and discourses; a different understanding of well-being beyond ecological modernization and the green growth imperatives; linkages to debates, initiatives and politics, for example, around labor, welfare, and patriarchy. From such a broad perspective, it is crucial to identify central terrains of transformation, for example, in the case of Germany to end electricity production from lignite and to promote conversion of the automotive industry. Such “emblematic transformative conflicts” might have the potential to show that more is at stake than particular contestations, which means that sustainability transformations, although taking place at very specific scales, with particular strategies and alliances, are part of overarching processes in which powerful actors are likely to lose something.

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⁴ See the initiative *Changing Cities* that struggles to improve the conditions of cycling and strengthening the rights of bicyclists: <https://changing-cities.org>.

See also the dynamic international movement to promote cycling “Critical Mass”: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_Mass_.

⁵ Open Access at Ingenta: www.ingentaconnect.com/content/oekom/gaia/2018/00000027/a00101s1jsessionid=2kvpngng8g093k.x-ic-live-03.

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