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Karl Polanyi's 'Great Transformation'

What is the ethical background when we are talking about transformation design? Is it the Western mainstream notion of happiness through consumption, where consumption is predicated on having a reasonably paid job? Is it about expanding the Western model over the rest of the world? Probably not. Anthropologist and sociologist Karl Paul Polanyi (1886–1964) described the emergence of this almost unquestioned and meanwhile universal economic logic in his book *The Great Transformation* (1944). 'Great Transformation' means the transformation of land, work, and money and various other previously common goods into commodities. Or the transformation of societies *with* markets into *market societies*. Polanyi calls this the 'dis-embedding of the markets', which was completed in the West by the turn of the twentieth century. The early-industrialised countries for the most part still define the standards and rules of global development. Yet their wealth relies on global inequalities going back to colonial times. And it relies on overexploitation of resources.

Conceived in 1990 by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, the 'Ecological Footprint' is now in widespread use for monitoring ecological resource use and advancing sustainable development (Wackernagel and Rees 1996). By measuring the footprint of a population – an individual, city, business, nation, or all of humanity – we can assess our pressure on the planet, which helps us to manage our ecological assets more wisely and take personal and collective action in support of a world where humanity lives within the earth's bounds. The average Ecological Footprint per person worldwide is 2.6 global hectares, while the average bio-capacity available per person is 1.8 global hectares. Some countries' levels of ecological demand per person are much higher than the world average, while others are much lower.

Obviously, we have to talk about reduction and alternative paths, Victor Papanek's (1985) 'real needs'. But which are the 'real' needs? Does this patronising notion make sense, or is it an ideological arrogance, a relic from the 1970s? Are people really fooled by the glittering world of consumerism? Maybe they truly *want* it, because they believe it makes them happy. At the very least, there are many question marks behind the question of what people really want. 'Design for the other 90%' (Smith 2007) sounds great but is also somehow misleading, because it might suggest that the 'first 10%' are unproblematic, which they are not. So we should talk about differentiated measures for the quality of life, about equilibrium economies, about reductionist modernity, small-scale transitional approaches. Not only, but primarily in the West. And we should talk about the role of design and design theories.

Broader Notions of Design

Despite more than forty years of critical approaches, we must state that mainstream design practice today is still acting in the highly problematic role of catalyser/accelerator for socially dis-embedded economic purposes.
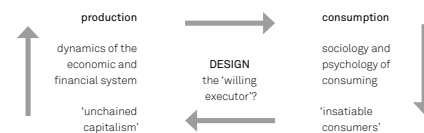
1 The vicious cycle of production and consumption, driven by design (Jonas)

On the other hand, design, as a profession and an academic discipline, has never fully accepted the reality of the first 'Great Transformation'. In reflective moments, designers question their professional function as 'willing executors' in sustaining the dynamics of the market society. The Kyoto Design Declaration 2008 is a pretty but almost embarrassing example:

A statement of commitment by the members of Cumulus to sharing the global responsibility for building sustainable, human-centered, creative societies. [...]

Human-centered design thinking, when rooted in universal and sustainable principles, has the power to fundamentally improve our world. It can deliver economic, ecological, social and cultural benefits to all people, improve our quality of life and create optimism about the future and individual and shared happiness.

Scepticism is appropriate towards this naive universalist humanitarian attitude. Critical voices have already interpreted it as a new Western imperialism (Nussbaum 2009): colonisation by Design Thinking. We agree, but why 'new'? Regardless of, or despite, these flowery humanitarian appeals, there are thousands of practical initiatives within and mainly outside design that should be appreciated and evaluated.

There is the need to become less moralistic and ideological. And maybe more theoretical, keeping ethics implicit in the theories and methodologies that we are using. Theory may provide a certain distance from the immediacy of the current chaotic dynamics of production, consumption, and design, and also a sense of consolation in the face of the often perceived powerlessness. We have to challenge the usefulness of seemingly universal standards and unquestioned assumptions in economy and science. Our hypothesis is that design thinking, meaning more than

Empathy: Obscured through the Prison Mask?

The issue of empathy is of heightened significance in the prison context because so many prisoners suppress emotions. The sociologist Berger (1963) pointed out that when people go to prison, it has a significant impact on identity management – and the younger the offender, the greater the impact – because a prison sentence constitutes a 'massive assault' on the senses. The fact that deprivation and frustration contribute to the psychological impact of incarceration has been documented by many criminologists, and warrants greater consideration and management. For example, Irwin (1970) identifies the many ways prison negatively contributes to emotional development, including empathic development. Consequently, most first-time prisoners, in seeking to preserve their previous understanding of being 'oneself', appear to engage in the suppression of emotion to try to hang on to who they were. He also points out that, as part of this process, inmates feel the need to develop a prison 'persona', a 'front' that is often different from the previous outside-world persona or pre-prison identity, aimed at helping the inmate to adapt and avoid trauma and the painful institutional contingencies of prison life. Travis and Waul (2003) write about the impact of incarceration on children, families, and communities and observe that families report that 'many [inmates] who become institutionalized are unaware that any transformation has occurred. Few consciously decided to allow such a transformation to take place […]'.

Ethnographic works from Schmid and Jones (1991), who interviewed first-time maximum-security inmates, found the creation of prison personas also contains implicit survival tactics in terms of psychological adaptation. Schmid and Jones (1991) and McCorkle (1992) discuss the dilemmas that inspire prisoners to 'turn off' capacity for some types of empathic identification, by becoming hyper-vigilant, always alert for signs of threat or risks to personal safety, exhibiting suspicion. In harsh prison regimes, distrust and caution almost become reflexive processes. Fear is, of course, experienced differently depending on the age and cultural background of the inmate, and may eventually be superseded by feelings of boredom, which also characterise the reality of prison life. Yet fear has a different emotional impact. Many inmates at the outset of the prison journey, women as well as men, say they feel the need to hide feelings of vulnerability, and discontinuity; and they try to differentiate themselves from other inmates – just as we do in the outside world – in order to cope with difficult situations. Schmid and Jones (1991) argue the main difference is that "impression management" in prison differs, because of the totality with which it governs interactions. Also because the perceived costs of failure are humiliation, assault, and death. Consequently, the entire impression management process in prison becomes a highly conscious endeavour […]'. For most inmates who can manage it, the presentation of a 'prison mask' is a continuous performance, but of course not all can manage to hold the mask in place, while others cannot remove it on release.

Travis and Waul (2003: 52) point out that 'at least twenty per cent of the current prison population suffer from some sort of significant mental or psychological disorder or developmental disability' (with some estimates suggesting this figure is even higher).[2] For example, the Prison Reform Trust identifies a range of mental health issues[3] that may mean many inmates are likely to have difficulties managing multiple identities implicit in the creation and maintenance of a prison mask.

Unlike roles in the outside world, those in prison are not trans-situational. Here, Travis and Waul (2003: 42) identify that inmates 'constantly hide their feeling from others […] leading to some prisoners forgetting that they have any feelings at all'. Of course, we are not saying that inmates do not understand what other inmates, victims of crime, or officers in the system 'feel'. Most inmates who do not have severe mental health problems can recognise the perspective of others (cognitive empathy) but may 'turn off' an entwined perspective, such as 'affective empathy', to get by. There are numerous accounts of the ubiquity of the prison mask (Cogan and Paulson 1998), and while it is true that some criminologists dispute whether or not this mask metaphor is always appropriate (Cheliotis 2012), we feel

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ago, namely the capitalist formation of all areas of life, is still in full swing: globalisation, standardisation of forms of life and consumption, individualisation, progressive resource use, commercialisation of all areas of life, economic monopolies, geopolitical re-figurations. All this is not finished, but indeed is currently being intensified. This finding is also, or especially, true if the term Great Transformation is used in reference to Karl Polanyi. For the so-called 'dis-embedding' of market processes from superordinate societal contexts, which he identified and criticised (Polanyi 1973), is being intensively continued in the present.

Transformation by Design or by Disaster

This economic and social model, which threatens to become fatal, especially in the course of its globalisation, has led not only to a historically quite incomparable general level of prosperity but also to non-material standards of civilisation that modern societies consider as imperative today: freedom, democracy, rule of law, education, and health and social care. So if one puts the question of necessary transformations in the economy into a social context, it is about nothing less than the question of whether the standard of civilisation that people have achieved in the early-industrialised societies can be preserved or not. This question is not trivial, but concerns very basic living conditions. One only has to compare the life of a 'typical teenager' at the beginning of industrial modernity with his/her life today to realise not only the incredible increase in possession of *things*, but also the astounding growth of personal opportunities. The typical teenager of the late nineteenth century did not attend school, but went to a factory to put in ten to twelve hours of poorly paid work, and his/her average life expectancy was not eighty but forty-five years (Uchatius 2013). This example illustrates like a spotlight that the last hundred years have not only meant an increase in material wealth but also a progression of civilisational standards.

Therefore, the challenge for transformation design is to trace a mode of socialisation that allows for the retention and even further development of these same civilisational standards, and at the same time admits radically reduced consumption of natural resources. So it's not about a 'back to the trees' project, as polemically assumed by the critics of environmentalism, but rather about the *organisation of reduction in the context of modern societies*.

Politically, this translates into the question of whether one proactively uses the possibilities for economic and social transformation that are given under the present conditions, or whether one passively consigns to a process in which the possibilities for action are steadily narrowing under increasing stress, in which the primacy of the economy is still further strengthened, and which finally could lead to a de-civilisation, which gives more rights and survival chances to the stronger than to the weaker.

Following Mathis Wackernagel (2014), the president of the Global Footprint Network, the underlying pragmatic attitude can be easily characterised: in the context of their unsustainable metabolism, with its non-human nature, our societies will change in any case; the only question is whether by design or by disaster. In case of a 'transformation by design', one cannot avoid looking at social issues.

Is a Reductive Modernity Possible?

Despite the sometimes massive overuse of ecosystems and natural resources, large parts of the world population continue to suffer deprivation. In the opinion of the development economist Kate Raworth (2012), the reason for this is *not* the number of the world's population, in other words the notion that too many people live on the earth, as neo-Malthusian argumentation patterns imply. The decisive factors are mainly the resource-intensive modes of production and consumption in the early-industrialised developed countries. Thus, Raworth states:

- Only 11 per cent of the global population is responsible for about 50 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions, while 50 per cent of people emit only 11 per cent (2012: 20).
- About 16 per cent of the population consumes 57 per cent of the world's electricity (20).
- The European Union – about 7 per cent of the world's population – is responsible for the consumption of about 33 per cent of a sustainable nitrogen budget, and this mainly for the production of animal feed (20).

'The wealthy few stress the planet', Raworth says (19). Following Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, one can speak in this context of an 'imperial way of life' (Brand and Wissen 2011). By that, they mean 'manorial production-, distribution- and consumption patterns that are deeply embedded in the everyday practices of the upper and middle classes in the global North and increasingly in the emerging economies of the South' (79). This way of life is considered 'imperial' because it presupposes an in-principle unlimited access to resources, space, labour capacity, and disposal sites elsewhere, which are secured politically, legally, and in part even violently (83). In other words, this way of life is based on exclusivity: it presupposes that not all people have equal access to the resources and sinks of the earth (84). Ecologically, it can only work this way.

From a historical perspective, one may also observe that such a way of life, which is structurally dependent on the use of natural resources from outside, has not been the result of the industrialisation of Europe but has rather been its condi-