

EDITORIAL

Inquiring transformations of state, economy and society

Felix Petersen* and Martin Seeliger**

Transformations and social inquiry

Two seminal texts of twentieth-century social research analyze the emergence of modernity under the concept *transformation* – Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) and Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Their work converges on important issues and is essential for contemporary social research, although Polanyi and Habermas contributed to different waves of political, economic and social thought.

Karl Polanyi was born 1886 in Vienna. He grew up in Budapest, fled in the interwar period first to Vienna and then to London, before leaving Europe in 1940 for the United States. In Budapest, Vienna and London, Polanyi was involved in working-class politics and workers' education. His whole life was shaped by the turmoil and tectonic changes set into motion with the two World Wars. And different authoritarian contractions forced him to leave everything behind and continue his work in new places. Jürgen Habermas was born 1929, the year of the Great Depression, in Düsseldorf. He grew up near Cologne, where his father – an NSDAP member later classified by the allied forces a *follower* (*Mitläufer*) – headed the Gummersbach branch of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. The legacy of the Third Reich became a driving force for Habermas' criticism and turn towards critical theory.

Comparing these two scholars, we notice the influence of historical transformations over their own experience, life and work. And there are similarities beyond the focus on transformations that are worth pointing out. Both Polanyi and Habermas offer substantial critiques of capitalism and emphasize the problematic influence

* Institute for Political Science, University of Münster, Scharnhorststr. 100, 48151 Münster, email: felix.petersen@uni-muenster.de

** Institute for Labor and the Economy, University of Bremen, Domshof 26, 28195 Bremen, email: seeliger@uni-bremen.de

of capitalist economy and economic decision-making on politics and democratic government. Among others, Polanyi's work illustrates the destructive force of unregulated markets and their consequence for social and political transformations (Polanyi 1944). Habermas study on the conditions of late capitalism elaborates how economic defects create legitimacy problems for democratic institutions (Habermas 1973). His theories of communicative action and deliberative democracy speak of a "colonization of the lifeworld" through the economic system and its medium (money) and elaborate the consequences of this effect for communication, action, and democratic politics (Habermas 1981; Habermas 1992).

Importantly, both Polanyi and Habermas understand societies as complex arrangements, which entails being aware of the interconnectedness of social structures, institutions, and human relations. We can even argue that their work begins with this assumption of social complexity. With different gestures, Polanyi and Habermas illustrate that irrespective of their complexity, these social arrangements change and transform and are driven by different social, economic and political forces. Societies are then complex social amalgamations that we can only organize and systematize to a limited degree, even with methods of social research. Accordingly, distinctions such as private and public, or state and economy, are merely auxiliary means to live up to the claim of systematic social research.

Returning to the observation that Polanyi and Habermas analyze the emergence of modern society with reference to the concept *transformation*, a discussion of their arguments might be helpful – in particular in view of the inflationary use of the term *transformation* in contemporary social research. Engaging with their inquiries into larger social transformations allows us to reconstruct the framework of this issue of the *Journal of Political Sociology*.

Polanyian transformations

In *The Great Transformation* (1944), Polanyi examines the role of the market in sequences of social development. The premise underlying his perspective is the idea that society and nature provide the basic conditions for the existence of the economy. Concurrently, the economy has a tendency to consume and deplete its social and natural resources. Polanyi's concept of fictitious commodities offers a lens through which to comprehend this dynamic. He identifies money, land and labour as such commodities, since they do not come into existence because they are produced to be sold in a market, like other commodities, but because they follow a more genuine state of existence. As these three commodities become increasingly subject to the prevailing market logic (in other words, bought and sold with little or no regulation), there is a concomitant loss of their use value. Polanyi refers to these

sequences of social change as “waves of market disembedding,” which occur when fictitious commodities are commodified.

Along these lines, Polanyi reconstructs two waves of modernization, reaching from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Firstly, the reform of the Poor Laws and the privatization of rural land drove English workers into the industrializing cities. In response, trade unions and welfare institutions emerged, enabling the state to regulate proletarian labour markets. A second wave of commodification came with the abandonment of the gold standard in the 1920s. Again, these developments were contradicted by the emergence of national political movements, ranging from Roosevelt’s New Deal politics to Stalinism and Hitlerite fascism.

Drawing on Polanyi’s line of reasoning, we can argue that globalization has since the 1970 set off a third wave of *market disembedding*. In this transformation, the increase in the supply of labour through the expansion of the market increased its commodity character. And capital has been able to reduce wage costs and cut social benefits in Western countries by relocating production capacity to low-wage countries, while at the same time stimulating consumption with cheap goods. Using Polanyian theory, we conclude that these developments have significantly contributed to the current political crisis and the rise of a new authoritarian populist right (on this issue, Petersen, Brunkhorst, Seeliger 2022).

Habermasian transformations

In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas also studies a constitutive *transformation* in the development towards contemporary society. He identifies the preconditions, dynamics and prospects of public reason that societies mobilize at the intersection of civil society and media (Habermas 1989). According to his inquiry, the public sphere becomes a central element of social organization because modern societies identify and order their political problems according to their urgency and degree of solvability through the public sphere (see Habermas 1992; on public problem-solving, see Petersen 2022).

Interestingly, Habermas’s conceptualization of the public sphere resembles Polanyi’s two waves of structural transformation. Habermas (1989, 1992) argues that the public sphere emerged in the seventeenth century. As modern family structures evolve, a locus for the exercise of literacy, debates and general humanity emerges. In the pre-industrial societies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, coffee houses and salons served as the breeding ground for the modern public sphere. This sphere underwent significant changes in the course of a second wave of structural transformation. Over the course of the twentieth century, the rise of mass media and the encroachment of the welfare state into the domestic sphere of the household slowly undermined the rational character of the public sphere. Once a bastion

of rational discourse, the public sphere transformed into a complex apparatus for the production of affirmative ideologies.

Drawing on Habermas observations, we can argue that a third structural transformation of the public sphere is currently underway. As Seeliger and Sevnigani (2022) explain, this last sequence is driven by the interplay of three trajectories: globalization, digitalization and commodification. Through this last transformation, the potential for mobilizing collective reason through public debate has further decreased. In our view, this development drives the crisis of liberal democracy and contributes to the return of authoritarianism.

Structure of this issue

The contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Political Sociology* discuss the transformations at the heart of Polanyi's and Habermas' work. Broadly speaking, the articles are inquiries into the political negotiations over the (de)commodification of labor or the social construction of collective reason in political communication.

Bjarke Refslund and Jens Arnholtz study how work and workers influence politics. Jürgen Beyer's article examines the *relief of responsibility* and its pervasive influence over capitalist market societies. Martin Höpner's and Maximilian Kiecker's contribution explains the Nordic opposition against the European minimum wage directive. Martin Höpner and Maximilian Kiecker construct the basic framing of a political sociology of crisis and discuss possible characteristics of a genuine political-sociological approach to this topic. Gabriella Scaramuzzino and Roberto Scaramuzzino analyze the framing of hate speech, threats, and harassment by Swedish civil society actors.

The issue also includes a review article and an interview, both focusing on the political consequences of the current transformation. Udeepa Chakravarty's review article analyzes the latent normativity inherent to most theoretical projects examining populism. Felix Petersen and Martin Seeliger speak to the German intellectual Ingar Solty about Trump's election victory and the transformation of American democracy.

The last contribution to this issue remembers Michael Burawoy, who tragically died on February 2, 2025. Gay Seidman's obituary remembers this great sociologist and recapitulates his work and influence on the discipline and the community of social researchers.

Literature

Habermas Jürgen. [1962] 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1973. *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

- Habermas, Jürgen. 1981. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1998. *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Petersen, Felix, Hauke Brunkhorst, and Martin Seeliger. 2022. "Critical problems and pragmatist solutions." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 48(10): 1341-1352.
- Petersen, Felix. 2022. "Pragmatist democracy and the populist challenge." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 48(10): 1427-1444.
- Polanyi, Karl 1957. *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Seeliger, Martin and Sebastian Seignani. 2022. "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? An Introduction." *Theory, Culture & Society* 39(4): 3-16.