

INTRODUCTION

Symptoms of transformative societies and practices for dealing with change

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The current era is a period of great transformations. Globalisation, digitalisation, the struggle over decarbonisation, and other drivers are pushing sequences of social change, which fundamentally reshape patterns of contemporary social ordering. For most people around the globe, these developments increase subjective and collective feelings of uncertainty and threaten the stability of the social fabric. While globalisation questions the nation-state as the legitimate political framework, digitalisation transmutes patterns of public communication and thus what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) have termed the social construction of reality. As a consequence, the optimistic image of the world as a “global village” (McLuhan and Powers 1995) is slowly being replaced by the image of a fragmented and competitive world populated by more or less isolated *gated communities*.

The closer look inside societies reveals a similar pattern, as relationships between individuals and among social groups are also characterised by fragmentation. For instance, with regard to the material conditions of human existence, some perceive climate change as existentially threatening the habitability of the planet and demand not just a change in thinking but a restructuring of social systems and practices. Others neglect the severe consequences of human action for nature, wildlife, and climate and support a status quo protecting conservative politics seeking to return to a romanticised glorious past. While the experience of crisis may seem universal, the symptoms of these critical developments are perceived differently. This observation is important insofar as it helps us in understanding that individuals may respond to crises by either turning away from or towards democratic solutions.

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Considering public and democratic solutions to political problems produced by social transformations, a pragmatist perspective emphasises that the experience of problems is a fundamental initial step in the process of devising solutions (see Dewey 1939: 70). Nevertheless, a subsequent step is required to transform such subjectively *felt* problems into public problems. It appears that Western liberal societies are currently unable to progress from the initial phase to the subsequent stage. As experiences vary and problem descriptions differ, individuals, organisations, and institutions encounter difficulties in connecting diverging subjective experiences. In other words, societies fail to transform the varied positions into collectively relevant judgements that have the potential to unify across societies. Consequently, while the crises are experienced by many, the subjective experiences remain isolated from each other. Or worse, they develop into irreconcilable antagonistic opposites. As a result, many solutions remain inadequate, as they selectively address only some problems while others remain unresolved. Unfortunately, this increases the experience that social and political institutions and organisations are unresponsive and fail to solve relevant problems.

Given the multiplying problems and challenges accompanying the current transformations, it seems obvious that new means of problem-solving must be created. However, the *Zeitgeist* longs rather for established and old solutions and responds with aversion to experimental suggestions that require societies, individuals, organisations and institutions to venture beyond established paths. Writing in the interwar years, John Dewey argued with respect to the emergence of new publics: “The public which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and lust of possession remains in the hands of the officers and agencies which the dying public instituted.” (Dewey 1927: 31) This sentence can be read as an illustration of Antonio Gramsci’s cryptic but familiar-sounding phrase that in moments of crisis we often gain the impression that before our eyes the “old world is dying” while “the new world struggles to be born” (Gramsci 2017). According to Dewey, it is the agents of the old social order that prevent the new public from fully unfolding its potential. And for this very reason, he concludes, change was in the past “often effected only by revolutions.” (Dewey 1927: 31)

Importantly, for Dewey and other pragmatists, democracy is a political practice that injects revolutionary power into everyday practices. From this point of view, it is the practice best suited to develop these new means of problem-solving. Obviously, the emergence of a democratic practice geared toward change ultimately depends on political agents and organisations. It is, as such, an empirical political question. Against the backdrop of democratic backsliding, scholars may play a role in such political activism, as publics experiencing democratic erosion and autocratisation have to be warned about the dangers of undemocratic political projects that emerge behind their backs (see Lerner et al. 2025). However, the main part that scholars

should play is to help understand the problems and assist in developing methods to translate subjectively felt into public problems societies can address.

The contributions published in this issue of *The Journal of Political Sociology* analyse symptoms of transformative societies and practices that individuals, organisations, or institutions develop in order to deal with large-scale social and political change and crises. As such, this issue continues the trajectory of new transformation research set in the previous two issues. Bringing together different perspectives on change and crisis, it provides a comprehensive overview of current challenges relevant from the viewpoint of political sociology and, more broadly, social science research.

The first three articles provide different conceptual frameworks to study current transformation processes:

Johannes Kiess, Jenny Preunkert, Martin Seeliger, and Joris Steg elaborate in their article on the contours of the political sociology of crisis and discuss possible characteristics of a genuine political-sociological approach to (political) crisis. The proposed augmented discrepancy approach assumes that the non-alignment of (democratic) political ideals and really-existing political practices leads social formations into crisis.

Zooming in on one of the key symptoms of the current crisis, the spread of conspiracy theories, Nils C. Kumkar, Sarah Speck, Markus Brunner, Florian Knasmüller, Simon Kreienbaum and Oliver Nachtwey develop a research programme to study the production of conspiracy theories as a collective social practice. In their article, they argue that conspiracy theories may not necessarily constitute belief systems but should be studied as broader crisis phenomena connected to particular practices and inherent psychodynamics.

Focusing on the level of organisations, Robert Jungmann, Jana Albrecht, and Nadine Arnold develop a theoretical framework for analysing wicked problems. Their article identifies overlapping organisational constructions as a driving force of wicked problems. Among others, this research shows why the meaning attributed to problems often differs and what role organisations play in creating wicked problems.

The following three articles then address specific practices for dealing with the consequences of the current transformation:

Philipp Rhein's contribution focuses on apocalyptic narratives in right-wing politics. Drawing on narrative interviews with AfD voters, Rhein shows that unfulfilled expectations and broken political promises fuel anti-political end-time narratives that reject democratic negotiation. He concludes that this form of apocalypticism is a response to the experience that the future is no longer perceived as a subject for collective political negotiation.

Ilana Nussbaum Bitran and Irene Dingeldey defend the concept of transnational solidarity developed in an earlier issue of this journal. The integration of national

political economies within the EU into one common market can be understood as a major element of contemporary transformation. Against this background, the quest for a bottom limit to wages within the EU can be understood as a central moment in the struggle for decommodification of labour. In the ongoing debate, Nussbaum, Bitran and Dingeldey defend their point of the European minimum wage as an expression of transnational solidarity among EU trade unions.

Dorothee Riese's article „Actors' Theories of Legitimate Secrecy – The Case of Public-Private Partnerships in the German Bundestag” studies political actors' practical theories of legitimate secrecy. Drawing on a case study of debates about public-private partnerships in the German Bundestag, it illustrates how patterns of transparency vs. patterns of secrecy both constitute important moments of decision-making within multi-level systems of democratic decision-making.

With this issue, we also introduce a new format: “exchange of arguments”. In this section, interlocutors exchange arguments over a certain issue raised in the work of one scholar. The following initial “exchange of arguments” focuses on the extent to which left-wing populism can be considered an adequate response to the current crises. We are delighted that Chantal Mouffe, a seminal scholar of populism studies and democratic theory, has agreed to participate in this discussion. In her recent work, Mouffe argues that populism must be analysed not as a distinct ideology but as a reaction pattern to recent social crisis tendencies. However, given the obvious problems of liberal democracies in coping with processes such as economic globalisation and decarbonisation, populism has chiefly played out as an identitarian project of the political right, nurtured by a sense of re-establishing nation-state polities of the post-war era or even by a reactionary sense of resurrecting nationalism. In contrast, Mouffe argues that instead of a principled anti-populism, a left-populism points to a way forward. It draws on populist themes – such as the divide between the *elite* above and the *people* below or the defence of popular sovereignty – but connects them to a progressive ecological and social justice agenda. The contributions of Max Rozenburg, Philipp Degens and Veith Selk indicate that such political projects may not be implemented as easily as anticipated. For instance, there are still discernible internal tensions between populist politics and the necessity for just transitions within the domain of climate politics. Consequently, it should be noted that contemporary left-populist endeavours, such as La France Insoumise in France and Die Linke in Germany, are encountering challenges in their attempts to promote socio-ecological populism.

As the exchange of arguments already indicates, a more sophisticated approach to the analysis of populism is needed. This is also reflected in Lazaros Karavasilis's review of the recent book “Populist Discourse: Recasting Populism Research” written by Yannis Stavrakakis. By revisiting the arguments in Stavrakakis' book, he

emphasises that we need a more analytical understanding of populism that demystifies widespread misconceptions.

We hope that the contributions to this issue will help to improve our understanding of societies in transition with regard to controversial political issues, the consequences and symptoms of social transformations, and the practices used to deal with the challenges of social change.

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