



UNMAKING: a research programme on societal transformation to sustainability through the disruption of capitalism

This project will use a novel interdisciplinary theory and an innovative combination of methods to explain whether, when and how grassroots initiatives unmake environmentally disruptive institutions and practices that are deeply ingrained in capitalist societies.

Motivation

Modern capitalist societies engage in destructive modes of interaction with the natural environment. The notion of sustainable development was proposed in the 1990s as an attempt to compose such tension, but improvement has been limited. Destructive interaction with the natural environment is not simply a remediable side effect, but a characterizing trait of modern capitalist societies.

Therefore, the need for a societal transformation to sustainability is now increasingly accepted. However, the question of how a societal transformation to sustainability can actually come about is still open.

Grassroots initiatives may hold the potential to transform society toward sustainability, but their capacity to generate such transformation is unclear.

Primary research question

To what extent, under what conditions and through what processes grassroots innovations unmake modern, capitalist institutions and practices?

Expected results

This research comparatively studies grassroots initiatives in agriculture to:

1. identify and categorize mechanisms of unmaking that are involved in radical grassroots innovations;
2. explain whether and how unmaking creates space for alternatives from the individual to the social-ecological level;
3. understand how mechanisms of unmaking at different levels interplay;
4. explain why unmaking may result in different outcomes in the face of different types of capitalism;
5. develop a theory of unmaking in societal transformation to sustainability.

What is 'unmaking'?

The concept of unmaking is originally proposed in this programme to denote **multilevel processes to deliberately 'make space' for alternatives that are incompatible with capitalist socioecological configurations**. They can vary from open confrontation to 'exit' from the dominant system.

For example, (1) members of the Transition Towns Movement worldwide undertake so-called 'inner transition' to *liberate* themselves from habitual and addictive tendencies, and enable harmonious engagement with people and nature; (2) urban gardeners physically *deconstruct* spaces to give them new meaning and innovative food producing uses; (3) the ecovillage of Lamas lobbied the Welsh Government to *reject* standard land use classifications and change planning legislation, which permitted access to land for self-built ecohousing; (4) Fordhall farm in England *refused* economic growth imperatives, which created the need for innovative 'popular shareholding' governance arrangements

Case studies and methods

This programme focuses on whether and how capitalism is already being unmade by two types of grassroots innovations that are informed by visions of societal transformation, and hold the potential to lead such transformation: **permaculture** and **community supported agriculture**.

Over five years, a sample of permaculture and community supported agriculture initiatives is studied in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. This research explores causality in complex social-ecological systems comparing narratives across selected case studies. To do so, it combines **Event Structure Analysis** and **Qualitative Comparative Analysis**.

Novelty

This research:

1. approaches societal transformation from the novel perspective of unmaking, rather than of the introduction of innovations,
2. mobilizes and innovatively integrates theories that have so far not been considered in the analysis of transformation to sustainability,
3. originally employs mixed methods to capture trajectories of change, and to generalize causal mechanisms in complex social-ecological systems.

Team

Giuseppe Feola – programme leader

Giuseppe is Associate Professor of Social Change for Sustainability at Utrecht University. Email: g.feola@uu.nl



Olga Coretcaia – research assistant

Olga graduated in 2018 from the Master's in Sustainability Science and Policy at Maastricht University, with a thesis on the Economy for the Common Good as a case of a social movement organization that can destabilize regimes in sustainability transitions. Email: o.coretcaia@uu.nl



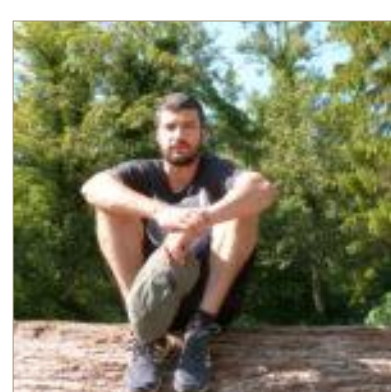
Laura van Oers – PhD candidate

Laura graduated in 2017 from the Master programme Innovation Sciences at Utrecht University and wrote her thesis on the creation of legitimacy in Dutch Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives. In her PhD, Laura will focus on the Netherlands. Email: L.M.vanOers@uu.nl



Jacob Smessaert – PhD candidate

Jacob holds a double degree in agronomic sciences (University of Liège, Belgium) and political ecology (AgroParisTech, France). He graduated with a thesis on the commodification of nature and the ways in which politicizing nature might open new perspectives for alternative collective futures. In his PhD, Jacob will focus on the Netherlands and Spain. Email: j.d.a.smessaert@uu.nl



Guilherme Raj – PhD candidate

Guilherme graduated in 2018 from the Master's in Communication, Health and Life Sciences, specialization Innovations in Sustainable Food Systems at Wageningen University. His thesis investigated the power relations and dynamics that influence the development of alternative food networks in Kyoto, Japan. In his PhD, Guilherme will focus on Italy. Email: g.desapavariniraj@uu.nl



Leonie Guerrero – PhD candidate

Leonie graduated in 2018 from the Master's in Social-Ecological Resilience and Sustainable Development at Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University. Her thesis focused on food initiatives using traditional knowledge as a source of innovation for more sustainable food systems. In her PhD, Leonie will focus on Germany and Italy. Email: l.guerrrolara@uu.nl



Julia Spanier – PhD candidate

Julia holds a MSc in Nature, Society and Environmental Governance from the University of Oxford. In her thesis, she analysed the assembling of postcapitalist, more-than-human, rural-urban futures in the French countryside. In her PhD, Julia will focus on Germany. Email: j.r.spanier@uu.nl



Internal advisory board and PhD promoters

- **Prof. Peter Driessen**, Environmental Governance, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University.
- **Prof. Ellen Moors**, Innovation Studies, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University.
- **Prof. Hens Runhaar**, Environmental Governance, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University.

External advisory board

- **Prof. Jenny Pickerill**, Department of Geography, University of Sheffield.
- **Prof. Marta Guadalupe Rivera Ferre**, Agroecology and Food Systems, University of Vic.
- **Prof. Giorgos Kallis**, Institute of Environmental Science & Technology, Autonomous University of Barcelona.