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 socio-ecological 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 Lammas 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 shareholderhips’ 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 socio-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
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