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## REFLEXIVE TRANSFORMATIONS AND HOW TO STUDY THEM What makes a “transformation” different from a mere “change”?

*Presented is the analysis of the UNESCO intergovernmental social and human science program focusing on “Management of Social Transformations” (MOST). In that connection, firstly, given is philosophical definition of the notion of “transformation”, and show is, what makes a “transformation” different from a mere “change”. Secondly, presented is the very UNESCO program. Described is the content of the program, defined are its tasks and goals, and possible ways of their implementation up to UNESCO 2030 Agenda. Finally, the author states, that “MOST has many tasks, and by its intergovernmental nature can call, potentially, on very diverse institutional capacities”.*

**Key words:** UNESCO, intergovernmental program, social transformations, institutional capacities.

## ВОЗВРАТНЫЕ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ И КАК ИХ ИЗУЧАТЬ Что «трансформацию» отличает от просто «изменения»?

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*Представлен анализ межправительственной программы ЮНЕСКО по социальным и гуманитарным наукам «Управление социальными трансформациями» (МОСТ). В этой связи, во-первых, дано философское определение понятия «трансформация», а также показано, что отличает «трансформацию» от просто «изменения». Во-вторых, представлена сама программа ЮНЕСКО. Описано содержание программы, охарактеризованы ее цели и задачи, а также возможные пути ее реализации к повестке ЮНЕСКО 2030 г. Наконец, автор делает вывод о том, что «МОСТ имеет многие задачи, решение каковых в связи с межправительственной природой программы требует развитых институциональных мощностей».*

**Ключевые слова:** ЮНЕСКО, межправительственная программа, социальные трансформации, институциональные мощности.

### UNESCO program MOST

This question may look rather artificial. After all, cannot words – to paraphrase the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* – mean anything we want them to? In which case, whether we distinguish between changes and transformations would be a matter of taste in vocabulary rather than anything significant about the world.

Some differences in vocabulary probably are of limited significance. But the idea that there are different kinds of change that deserve to be clearly distinguished is one that has a venerable history. Hegel's *Logic*, for instance, puts great emphasis on the contrast between purely quantitative growth and the qualitative transformations that are characteristic of organic development. In the life sciences, the question of morphogenesis has similar features, as does the issue of phase transitions in physics and chemistry. The notion that there is a major difference between, say, changes of temperature in a liquid and its solidification below a certain characteristic threshold speaks to common sense and is at the same time capable of rigorous scientific expression.

Roughly speaking, this philosophical and biophysical distinction can be expressed as follows. Change is a process that operates within certain fixed parameters, whereas transformation is a process of change that affects the systemic parameters themselves.

As it happens, this distinction corresponds to familiar usage in the social sciences as well. Karl Polanyi's classic study *The Great Transformation* exemplifies this way of understanding the idea of a “social transformation”, applied to the emergence in Western Europe of liberal market capitalism between the late 17<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. And Polanyi was of course building on a tradition of social science equally present in Marx, Durkheim and Weber, for whom fundamental changes of social formation – social transformations, in other words – were essential objects of study.

Intuitively, all of this is clear enough. A social change is like water getting colder or hotter, whereas a social transformation is like liquid water freezing or vaporizing. But this leaves open a series of conceptual puzzles and empirical difficulties.

Conceptually, cumulative synchronized changes can become transformative. This is Polanyi's thesis that the great transformation is about how political, economic and cultural forms interact and resonate to produce overall social formations. Capitalism cannot be interpreted purely in terms of economic arrangements, as Marx had already stressed. Its development, internal consistency and stabilization depend on its congruence with political and cultural superstructures. Similarly, analyzing what made the events of May 1968 in France transformative – although not, ultimately revolutionary – Pierre Bourdieu stressed in *Homo Academicus* how distinct processes of change in the academic, cultural and economic fields became temporarily synchronized in a specific political and social configuration.

What remains puzzling, however, is the connection between these changes, which are clearly neither independent nor reduc-

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed are those of the author and, except where specifically stated otherwise, should not be regarded as official statements of a UNESCO position on the topics addressed.

ible to a single underlying dynamic – despite the best efforts of technological or demographic determinists. Furthermore, the introduction of a cultural dimension into analysis of social transformations entail a degree of reflexivity that is conceptually hard to handle. If what makes a transformation transformative is general agreement that it has occurred, we end up with something looking rather like a vicious circle. Famously, this led the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to conclude that any revolution – we might say by extension, any genuine social transformation – is “overdetermined”, which means that little can be said of it except, *ex post facto*, that it has happened.

The idea of a social transformation could be conceptually elusive in general terms while nonetheless being reasonably clear and stable in practice. In fact, however, it appears that we have limited capacity to generalize about the empirical conditions in which observable changes build up to transformations – partly because of the reflexivity referred to earlier (change becomes transformative in part because it is understood as such), and partly because Polanyi’s “great transformation” is the only one on which there is broad agreement, which hampers the development of any kind of general theoretical framework.

Are we currently living through another “great transformation”, embedded in digital technologies and the political, cultural and economic changes connected to them? If so, where might it lead and how can we best understand its challenges? The social and human sciences should be able to answer these questions – or at least make sense of them and of the kinds of research and public discussion required to answer them. It is not very controversial to suggest that, at the moment at least, they cannot do so.

This is why UNESCO has an intergovernmental social and human science programme focusing precisely on the “Management of Social Transformations” (MOST). Not because social transformations are to be “managed” like a technocratic engineering project, but because, without the reflexive knowledge provided by the social sciences and the humanities, societies can only react passively to the challenges they face.

The original creation of the MOST programme in 1993 was a response to a time of transformation in which not just established systems and institutions, but also the narratives that made sense of them, were dissolving. In the meantime, many theories have been proposed to account for the current state of the world – including the familiar conceptual vocabulary of post-modernity and globalization – as well as extensive empirical evidence, but it would be hard to argue that they have converged on either an agreed understanding or a shared narrative.

The MOST programme thus retains its relevance, and has indeed received a new strategic impetus from UNESCO’s member states, at a time when the international community has a clear normative agenda for social transformation, in the form of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, but less clarity about what inclusive and sustainable societies might look like in detail and how they might be expected to function and produce, through their own internal processes, the capacity to reproduce themselves.

Among the challenges that the world faces in trying to achieve the 2030 Agenda, UNESCO member states have particularly called on MOST to consider social inclusion, environmental

change, migration, peace and governance, and digital transformations. Furthermore, recognizing the transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda, MOST works to promote futures literacy. While a future orientation is inherent to any action agenda with a 15-year timeframe, it is important to emphasize that this is not a planning process. By the very definition of transformation, as discussed above, the parameters of a more desirable future cannot be set within the constraints of the present, but must emerge from the cumulative changes themselves. Managing transformations is, in this sense, about enhancing action potentials and opening spaces of possibility.

The intellectual agendas required to respond to these challenges – and the institutional processes necessary to underpin them – are very diverse and cannot be reviewed in detail within the compass of this brief chapter.

One point, however, does deserve to be underlined. Each of the five challenges referred to – along of course with others of equal importance that fall outside the institutional scope of UNESCO’s MOST programme – goes beyond more precise analysis of how systems work. Of course it is important to describe, model, and perhaps to some extent predict, patterns of inequality, modes of adaptation to climate change, new migration flows, the dynamics of conflict, and the effects of the development of social media. At the same time, however, such phenomena cannot be understood at a purely systemic or structural level. Each of them has a powerful narrative dimension that calls on concepts and methods that often relate to the humanities as much as to the social sciences.

Thus, social inclusion, if it is to be achieved, depends on shared understandings of the nature and limits of solidarity and how it be inscribed in concrete institutions. A sustainable global society needs to make sense of the Anthropocene, understood as the inseparably scientific and imaginative understanding of collective human responsibility for the planetary system. Contemporary migration challenges are not just about managing borders, but about giving meaning to the idea of a distinct society in a globalized world. Similarly, echoing Hobbes’ argument that war is not to be understood simply as conflict but as the “known disposition thereto”, UNESCO’s Constitution locates “in the minds of men” the necessary “defences of peace” – which states very clearly that peace is a narrative supporting a collective identity. And it is hardly necessary to stress that the deployment of increasingly sophisticated and intrusive digital technologies raises the question what it is to be human with practical and not merely speculative urgency.

## Conclusion

MOST has many tasks, and by its intergovernmental nature can call, potentially, on very diverse institutional capacities. What this brief discussion points to is the cardinal importance of one particularly challenging task, which is effecting a new synthesis between the humanities and the social sciences, one that can explain how the world works as a system while also making sense of what it means. The idea of social transformations as reflexive processes that go beyond mere change demands no less.