

Marc Saxer

**Transformative Realism**



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# Transformativ Realism

How to overcome the system crisis

Translated from German by Ray Cunningham



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## Prologue to the English edition

What is Transformative Realism? It is the recognition that in order to overcome the financial, euro, climate, democracy, corona crises, we need to transform our political, economic, social, and cultural order from head to toe. We need bolder visions, more disruptive policies, speedier policy making and more decisive action. However, a reality check shows that transformative politics does not seem feasible either on the global, European or national level. The challenge is not so much that there are no solutions to our problems or that there are no actors willing to make a change. A realistic view of the balance of societal forces shows that those who benefit from, or believe that they benefit from the status quo form a formidable bloc of resistance which no social movement, social entrepreneur or even nation state can break through by themselves. Transformative Realism means that in order to transform the status quo, all politics must be understood as rooted in the balance of societal forces, and must aim to shift this balance of power.

So this book is less about the multiple, interconnected and mutually reinforcing crises crippling our societies, nor the policy solutions to the myriad of technical, financial, and administrative challenges we need to overcome. It is about the epistemology of change. Simply put, it is not about the *why* and *what* of change, but about the *how*.

In Western societies, progressive politics is conducted through two opposing yet equally ineffective approaches. In Berlin, Brussels and Washington, governance is understood as the art of the possible. This style of *technocratic incrementalism* cuts big crises into little pieces, and then tackles these smaller problems step by step. In normal times, this expertise-driven approach can be highly effective, and the no-nonsense approach of quiet problem solving is highly popular. But once these crises reinforce each other to make up a crisis of the entire system, minor repairs and adjustments no longer work. When the established order slips into permanent crisis, politics can no longer be conducted as technical

tinkering, but needs to reroute the development path of the entire society by means of bold paradigm shifts.

Frustrated by this ineptitude or lack of political will in both the state and the market, progressive activists have turned to moral activism. They believe that if only a sufficient number of individuals can be made to understand that they need to change their behaviour, together we can change the world for the better. The problem with this individualistic approach is that it overlooks the concentration of power in such crucial sectors as energy or finance, something that simply cannot be tackled by individual self-optimisation. Moreover, in a free democratic society, people always have the right to say »I don't want to«. But if for every climate protection activist there is a climate change denier, if for every vaccinated person there is an anti-vaxxer, society as a whole does not move forward. On the contrary, the overreliance on moral appeals fuels the shouting matches that are polarising the polity, making it harder and harder to strike widely accepted sensible compromises.

Transformative Realism understands that change is always the outcome of societal struggle between the forces behind the status quo and those who want change. As no single group has enough power to break this resistance, Transformative Realism is all about alliance building. The difference to prevalent approaches to alliance building, however, lies in which social groups are brought together, and who sets the agenda. Intersectional alliances between highly educated urban progressives and minority groups cannot mobilise sufficient power resources to break through the resistance of the forces behind the status quo. Left populists believe that this moral avantgarde of highly educated urban progressives alienates the working class and triggers reactionary counter-revolutions on the Right. However, their own approach – mobilising the 99% against the 1% – has never worked, and in practice often means overlooking the specific needs of minorities and narrowly focusing on the material needs of the indigenous working class.

Transformative Realism, on the other hand, seeks to bring together broad societal alliances that can mobilise the vast power resources needed to win the struggles against the forces behind the status quo. This means that no single social group, however powerful or influential, can be allowed to dominate the agenda. Transformative alliances need to bring together people with different and sometimes conflicting interests, iden-



tities and ideologies. To bring such a heterogeneous alliance together requires a common vision, broadly appealing narratives and widely acceptable policy platforms. In order to prevent frictions within the alliance, or the alienation of potential allies, radical positions from the political fringes need to be excluded. The aim is to bring together the broad centre of society and to shepherd it safely through the vertigo of change.

This has nothing in common with the defeatist centrism of the Third Way. On the contrary, the entire point of Transformative Realism is to lay the groundwork for bold, disruptive and speedy transformative politics. What it has understood, however, is that in order to keep the political stability needed for this open-heart surgery, potential adversaries need to be co-opted. Those who feel lost and anxious in the tumult of change must be reassured. More profoundly, in order to maintain social stability, the potential losers from the structural changes required must be compensated.

However, in our highly polarised polities, there are currently no topics or policies that people from different milieus or life-worlds can rally around. So progressives have to go back to the drawing board and think about ways to realign the current political formation. The toolbox for this has luckily already been given to us by sociological studies of the milieus of post-industrial, pluralist societies. The object is to get a very clear understanding of what social groups in a particular life-world (defined as a post-industrial milieu with shared material interests and needs, values and worldviews, hopes and fears) want, and then to construct shared visions, broadly appealing narratives and widely acceptable policy platforms around which an alliance of people with different interests, identities and ideologies can come together.

All politics are local. This means the proposed platforms in this book have been carefully crafted with the life-worlds of German society in mind. They are specifically designed to cater to material interests and needs within the context of the German political economy, to values and worldviews that have emerged from German history and culture, and to the hopes and fears that prevail against the backdrop of the social situation in Germany. It is therefore impossible to copy and paste these tailor-made platforms to tackle the transformation crises in other societies with different contexts. The search for visions, narratives and platforms that will enable the building of transformative alliances in your country must start from the life-worlds that make up your society.

What you might gain from this book is the epistemology and methodology of Transformative Realism. The need to refocus on the political economy and to build our politics with a clear-eyed view of the balance of social forces is universal. So too is the technique of rooting transformative politics in the needs and wants, hopes and fears of life-worlds. The resulting visions may vary, the narratives may be more context specific, the policy platforms may be composed differently, but the way to do it is always the same.

With Transformative Realism, I hope to contribute to the strategic debate on how progressives can overcome their fragmentation and weakness and gather new strength and unity. For all those who have clearly understood that we need a bolder politics that can overcome the endless crises crippling our societies, but who are dismayed that progressive projects repeatedly meet with resistance from the forces behind the status quo, with indifference from the wider public, or with rejection from former voters, Transformative Realism may offer a fresh perspective and a way forward.