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To tackle today's crises, we need transformative realism

Neither gradualism nor moral activism will solve today's major crises — from Covid-19 to climate breakdown. Instead, we need a broad social coalition

The financial crisis. The euro crisis. The climate crisis. The refugee crisis. The crisis of democracy. The Covid-19 crisis. They're all connected, mutually reinforcing, interdependent. To contain them, we must radically change the way we produce and consume, live and move about. But we're making very slow progress towards this Great Transformation; it may even fail completely.

Young people demand that we finally begin the Great Transformation, and Germany's Federal Constitutional Court agrees. It recently ruled that to preserve future freedoms, measures commensurate with the scale of the challenges must be taken today. However, history has taught many Germans to be sceptical of grand promises of complete renewal. Most prefer a calm style of politics. However, the 'down-to-earth politics that [were] neither left nor right' were anything but. Instead, 'There is No Alternative' neoliberalism continued dismantling the state.

The Covid-19 crisis laid bare the fact that Germany was not prepared for a serious health emergency. Meanwhile, in the form of China and Russia, streams of refugees, climate catastrophes, artificial intelligence, and negative interest rates, history returns with a vengeance. Germany, the self-styled 'island of bliss' must find its way as quickly as possible in this new period.

The failure of moral activism

But what is the actual reason all great plans to shape the transformation amount to nothing? To answer this question, we have to take a closer look at the currently prevailing concepts of 'the political', which are unsuitable for shaping the Great Transformation.

For years, Berlin and Brussels have followed a strategy of gradual reforms, with the technocratic repair shop breaking down major difficulties into small problems to solve one by one. Normally, mixing scientific expertise with good governance works fine. But with big, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing crises, this type of 'bullet-point-politics' doesn't solve the real problems anymore.

The frustration with the timid standard practice of government and business has stimulated a new approach in the progressive camp that I call 'moral activism'. Its advocates interpret the crises of our time as the ethical failure of *individuals*: Only when enough people realise they must change their behaviour will things change. In fact, millions of people have *already* begun to consume, travel, and live in an environmentally friendly fashion.

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Moral activism, however, has two blind spots.

First, focusing on individual lifestyles obscures the concentrations of power that dominate the energy, financial, and manufacturing sectors. When distributional conflicts, power asymmetries, and class interests fade from view, then responsible entrepreneurs, ethical consumers, and post-material self-realisers believe that all they can do is *work on themselves*. That won't do the trick.

Second, if modifying individual behaviour is the goal, moral activists have to enforce the 'right' way – whether that alienates potential allies or not. However, many people find moral appeals patronising and disrespectful. In the current cultural class wars, moralistic calls for change provoke defiant *'Now more than ever!'* responses from the other side. But with a climate denier for every climate activist, and a Covid-19 denier for everyone who follows the health regulations, we're stuck.

Anticipating political and social resistance, the technocrats pussyfoot – moral activists are ignorant of the political economy, and exhaust themselves with meaningless virtue signalling. Instead of wasting time with moralising appeals, we need practicable ways to bring about the Great Transformation. On the other hand, a realistic view of politics as 'the art of the possible' is no excuse to conduct business as usual. Minor course corrections will not solve the countless intertwined crises. To overcome the *systemic* crisis, we must fundamentally restructure the social order that generates ever *new* ones.

Such monumental changes provoke resistance from those who profit

from the status quo. The forces of inertia are strong, and the critical paradigm change cannot be implemented by any single social group – however powerful. That takes a broad social coalition: building alliances requires cooperation.

A transformative coalition

What's needed is what I call 'transformative realism' – an approach that builds broad platforms for people with different interests, identities, worldviews, and values to gather and fight for a better future. Alliance building is of course nothing new. The crucial difference to other approaches to building alliances is who defines these platforms. It's usually the so-called 'critical educated elite' – progressive, urban, highly educated academics, journalists or creatives – who set the political agenda, develop policy solutions, and are highly visible in public debates. Unsurprisingly, the resulting agenda reflects *their* fears and hopes, worldviews and lifestyles.

The self-styled moral vanguard provokes reactionary contrarians – and the two groups have shouting matches, poison the public discourse, and thereby neutralise each other. The resulting stalemate dooms attempts to impose a radical agenda on society.

This does not mean that the critical educated elite have no role to play. Their expertise, power of discourse, and passion are indispensable. But they must be ready to compromise with other milieus – or lifeworlds – to create a broad alliance. The critical educated elite must stop trying to force through what they view as *the* correct programme – and stop acting as if *their* way is morally superior.

The Green New Deal is a good example of a suitable platform.

Who can create transformative alliances that unite different lifeworlds? Forging social compromises between different classes has always been the strength of social democracy, and in the 21st century, its role remains to include as many people as possible in the Great Transformation. Today's polarised and fragmented society makes the task more difficult. We have got to build bridges between white and immigrant workers, and the old and new middle classes.

The failure of neoliberalism gives us the chance to create new social alliances. Widespread resistance to public investment, European solidarity, and additional climate protection measures persists. However,

during the Covid-19 crisis, key players have begun to reassess their interests. They understand that in the medium term, the state will have to shell out money to stimulate weak demand – which is possible with historically low interest rates. Cheap money wisely invested can lay the foundations of a socially and ecologically sustainable economy.

The Green New Deal

To mobilise social majorities for this new development model, the technical policies must be translated into narratives that are meaningful to a wide variety of social classes, camps, and lifeworlds. It is not enough to ask if our policies are ambitious enough to get to the root causes of the crisis. We also have to ask, 'What kind of platforms can unite the many different social forces needed to break through the resistance of the powers that be and enact a paradigm shift?' They must fulfil two opposing criteria. On one hand, they must be ambitious. That means they won't please everybody. But they must also be compatible … so they can't be *overly* ambitious.

The Green New Deal is a good example of a suitable platform. Climate-neutral restructuring has its price. France's 'yellow vest' protests show the danger of ignoring those affected by the 'climate revolution'. A narrow alliance of capital and climate protestors will not suffice to inspire Germans to embrace socio-ecological transformation. Only a *genuine* Green New Deal that compensates those who will lose out from structural change can sustain a broad social coalition. This political formula can now be applied to other political fields.

The Covid-19 crisis has pointed up the need to realign state, market, and civil society. Neither a patronising planned economy nor a neoliberal market economy can function in a pluralistic society. Broad social majorities, however, support a forward-looking fiscal and industrial policy to advance socio-ecological-digital change and break up anti-democratic monopolies. They can rally around a narrative of the state as a gardener – sowing, watering, nurturing, sheltering, and pruning.

Winning the fight against the Right calls for countering the politics of division with a politics of social cohesion. The return of world-class public services into the rust-belts will reassure those with misgivings that they will not be abandoned. A progressive patriotism offers an open-minded collective identity to all those who crave social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and firm roots during tumultuous change.

We can only make the Great Transformation happen by convincing a majority of society. Uncompromising radicalism won't. We need

programmatically broad platforms to broker social compromise between different lifeworlds. This is the formula of *transformative realism*.



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