



Social-Ecological Transformation

*Reconnecting Society
and Nature*

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To the memory of Marina

Preface

The theme of this book is the social-ecological transformation of modern society to a sustainable future society. Difficulties in this process are two-fold: complex environmental problems for which technological and engineering solutions are insufficient, and complex processes to be organised in the governance of global change or earth system governance. In sustainable development, as the transformation process is usually and inexactly called, a new democratic world order needs to be built to achieve the transformation to sustainability. Ends and means of global transformation interplay in complicated ways. The lack of success and the distortions of the prior sustainability process can be seen as a consequence of the prevailing policy: the neoliberal “green economy” strategy, aiming more at an ecological modernisation of the global economy than at a transformation into a sustainable economic system. In the 2015 summit of the United Nations a new agenda, “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, was adopted. This soft policy document shows still the predominant and incoherent sustainability thinking of the past, in normative terms, without adequate knowledge and governance practices—although the terminology of transformation is now in use.

When the global discourse of sustainable development began, about thirty years ago, the nature of the changes on the way to sustainability was not clear. A series of social, political, economic, and environmental changes paves the way to sustainability. Knowledge practices in the scientific and

political discourses of sustainable development and global governance need to be reviewed critically to initiate a transformation: specialised environmental research and governmental policies do not create the knowledge, action capacity, empowerment of actors, and transformative agency necessary to achieve sustainability. To build more coherent strategies and provide more realistic information, social-scientific and ecological knowledge of the changes of modern society and modern ecological systems needs to be synthesised. Meanwhile, sustainable development has been reformulated as another “great transformation”, using the term created by Karl Polanyi in his historical analysis of the rise of modern capitalism and its market economy in England. Today the term is used for a new, global transformation of modern society: a rupture of path-dependent development of the modern economic world system that is programmed for self-destructive economic growth and growth of resource use.

The social-ecological transformation is not another phase of modernisation, as discussed in theories of reflexive or ecological modernisation. The development of a collective political subject for global governance that can drive the transformation is a complex social process; it is not achieved with the organisation of cooperation of political actors with different interests in the routines of environmental policies at regional, national, and international levels. Transformative governance, rethought as social-ecological transformation, is higher-order governance for regulating long-term social and ecological change. Such regulation deals less with policy planning or the management and restoration of ecosystems and more with attempts to influence indirectly the autonomous processes of social and ecological development and change that cannot be managed, triggering further changes that result, finally, in the transformation of modern society and its relations with nature. On the way to global sustainability, a process of many decades or even some hundred years, a new mode of production is built, in the terminology of social ecology called a new societal metabolism.

This social-ecological process that touches all spheres of society and nature cannot be foreseen in its course. In the process of transforming society, only the near future is visible. The distant future, approached in subsequent phases of transformation, clarifies gradually with the advancing process.

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