

What are transformations, anyway?



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GAIA has given itself a new slogan: *The sustainability transformations journal*¹. As readers of this journal know, both concepts, sustainability and transformation, are notoriously vague and hard to define. But while much ink has been spilled in the past over attempts to fix the “floating signifier” that is sustainability, fewer efforts have been undertaken to clarify the precise meaning of transformation, other than in stating its most general usage as a marker of profound or structural change.

So, what are transformations, anyway? There are two somewhat contrarian tendencies in imagining transformations. One is the image of a grand mutation of the object in question so that the object changes its form and identity while retaining certain inherent features – think of the caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a butterfly!² This image is alluring as it offers a dualistic solution that is easy to grasp: a passage from one stable state to another, from a beginning to an end, from misery to salvation, with an enigmatic stage (the transformative stage) in between that is shielded from view by the pupa skin. The “sustainable society”, according to this imaginary, will be the result of industrial capitalism’s metamorphosis into something better, and it will be stable (*qua* sustainable) and beautiful (like the butterfly).

The other tendency is less ambitious as it takes the focus away from the final goal of transformation (the butterfly) and concentrates fully on the micro-level processes of change that may eventually accumulate into something profound and structural. From this perspective, every small-scale community project with an ecological purpose may be researched for its potential to contribute to a macro-level sustainability transformation. Sustainability transformations, according to this view, can be detected (and stimulated) on the level of everyday and communal life – at the risk of conflating the concept with more profane and inconsequential forms of change.

What both poles of the continuum share is an insistence on directionality: a transformation has a direction and will ultimately yield a new equilibrium. Perhaps, however, it is time for transformation research to open up to the idea that transformations can be multi-directional, contradictory, normatively disappointing, selective and even catastrophic. The outcome of a sustainability transformation may indeed not be a butterfly but a rather ugly moth. Energy transitions, for example, may not manage to halt the planetary ecological crisis, but lead to even more resilient and aggressive forms of capitalism. The geopolitics of renewables may get in the way of the butterfly we long for. Transformative measures may (and do) empower counter-movements that thwart the ideals of global justice and solidarity. This is not a call to give up the normative objective of strong sustainability transformations, but to sharpen our analytical skills to engage with sustainability transformations that have no clear direction and yield no desired equilibrium.

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¹ See Bieling, C. 2024. *GAIA: Mission and vision for the way ahead*. *GAIA* 33/1: 125. <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.33.1.1>.
² Cf. Linnér, B.-O., V. Wibeck. 2019. *Sustainability transformations: Agents and drivers across societies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p. 6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108766975>.