

# The Role of Ideational Change in Sustainability Transitions

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Sustainability is an undeniably normative goal to those working in or studying politics. The transition or transformation to political and societal systems that are sustainable, whatever that means, entails a variety of daunting and vague types of change: technological change, social change, institutional change. Together, these are called transformational change, paradigm shift, or the great transformation, as explained by Maya Göpel in *Navigating a New Agenda: Questions and Answers on Paradigm Shifts and Transformational Change* (2014).

Most change models related to sustainability at least acknowledge the importance of ideas in that process. But ideational change itself is not well understood: Does it take place at the individual level, in values, norms, or cognitive structures? Psychological research has so far come up empty-handed in its attempts to change deeply held (political) beliefs (synthesized nicely by Maria Konnikova in her article, “I Don’t Want to Be Right,” which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2014). Sociologists and political scientists would argue, of course, that ideational change is best measured in groups, through Kuhn’s paradigm shifts (in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962), Foucault’s discourses (*The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language*, 1982), or social movements’ use of frames. Political historians have split the difference, tracing ideas through important individuals working together in small groups, such as Louis Menand’s exploration of American pragmatism (in *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, 2001) or Daniel Stedman Jones’s study of transatlantic neoliberalism (in *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, 2012). And of course, the dirty word—ideology—omitted from virtually all these models must fit somehow into this complex story...

I plan to devote my time at the Rachel Carson Center to better understand ideational change and how it can be studied in the context of sustainability research. This means first nailing down a model and terminology for precisely what such change involves. What theories do we have and what empirical research tests them? Once I have built a model for ideational change, I hope to examine successful cases of such change throughout history, such as the rise of Progressivism at the turn of the twentieth century or neoliberalism into the twenty-first century. Finally, I will use these cases to better focus the requirements for a transition to sustainability.