

# Transformative Symposium: “Pioneers of Change”—Transformation Research for a Culture of Sustainability

Rachel  
Carson  
Center

**15–16 October, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin**

**Sponsor:** Research in Community (RIC), Heinrich Böll Stiftung (HBS), and Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

**Conveners:** Marcus Andreas (RCC / RIC), Dorothee Landgrebe (Heinrich Böll Foundation), Sandra Mende (RIC), Felix Wagner (RIC)

**Presenters:** Mirco Beisheim (Kultur-und-Energie-Bunker-Altona-Projekt e.V. / Energiegenossenschaft EnergieNetz Hamburg eG), Karin Boschert (Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Science, Research, and Art), Sarah Debor (Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy), Iris Degenhardt-Meister (BürgerEnergieGenossenschaft Wolfhagen eG), Forumtheatergruppe Act Back, Verena Holz (Leuphana Universität), Amanda Groschke (Kompetenznetzwerk dezentrale Energietechnologien e.V.), Karl Eugen Huthmacher (Federal Ministry of Education and Research), Gesa Maschkowski (Universität Bonn / RIC), Jörg Mayer-Ries (Federal Ministry of Environment), Denis Neumüller (Psychologist / Commons Researcher), Steffi Ober (Federation of German Scientists / Nabu / Forschungswednge), Inge Paulini (German Advisory Council on Global Change - WBGU), Angela Pohlmann (KlimaCampus Hamburg / Förderschwerpunkt Transformationsforschung), Uwe Schneidewind (Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy), Eva Stützel (Eco-Village Sieben Linden), Hauke Wagner (Vattenfall Europe), Heike Walk (Technical University of Berlin), Matthias Wanner (Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy), Harald Welzer (University of Flensburg), Gerd Wessling (Transition Netzwerk D/A/CH), Michael Würfel (Eco-Village Sieben Linden).

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On 15–16 October 2013 the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Research in Community (RIC), and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society hosted a symposium titled “‘Pioneers of Change’—Transformation Research for a Culture of Sustainability.” The aim of this event was to advance the theoretical and practical discussions on the role of “pioneers of change” in driving the “Great Transformation,” as suggested by the German Advisory Council on Climate Change (WBGU) in their 2011 flagship report *World in Transition – A Social Contract for Sustainability*. Approx-

imately 90 representatives from academia, politics, and civil society participated in the event and unfortunately many additional requests to register had to be denied.

**DOROTHEE LANDGREBE, FELIX WAGNER, and SANDRA MENDE** opened the event by posing a difficult question: What role do government, academia, and pioneers have to play in the Great Transformation? They emphasized that the phrases adopted from the WBGU—“pioneer of change” and “Great Transformation”—are themselves the source of many questions. The search for a common definition of these phrases would require not only an interdisciplinary but especially a transdisciplinary debate. The following two days would be spent discussing who these pioneers really are, whether the phrase pioneers is useful and logical, and what exactly is meant by “Great Transformation.”

The latter was the main topic of the opening podium discussion between **KARL EUGEN HUTMACHER**, director of the BMBF division Provision for the Future - Basic and Sustainability Research, Secretary-General of the WBGU **INGE PAULINI**, Managing Director of the Institute for Protest and Social Movements Studies **HEIKE WALK**, and **EVA STÜTZEL** from the ecovillage Sieben Linden. According to moderator **GESA MASCHKOWSKI** the key words of the discussion were courage, equality, and participation. The importance of inspiration, reflection, and a close relationship with society was also a common trend throughout the debate.

The discussants also spoke in favor of a proactive state as proposed by the WBGU report. However, they highlighted that citizens, including the openly critical interest groups, should be guaranteed significant influence in the political process through participatory measures. While **PAULINI** emphasized that achieving societal transformation would require both self-reflection and much courage from political actors, **HUTMACHER** petitioned for patience. Much has been done already, but these types of political enterprises take time—especially when the participation of civil society is encouraged. In her final remarks, which resonated well with the audience, **WALK** drew attention to the fact that there are certain “gate-keepers” in the political system that clearly block the adoption of necessary measures for the Great Transformation but remain relatively unsanctioned, and stressed the importance of ousting them.

The role of academia possibly inspired the most heated debate between the panelists. One idea, however, was agreed upon unanimously: academia should function more directly in and with society. In addition to this, **HUTMACHER** claimed that academia serves best as a source for innovative approaches and possible courses of action for advancing the Great Transformation. He stressed that achieving accessible results required a significant financial commitment to a broad and diverse spectrum of research. While acknowledging its important, **WALK** asserted that academia needed

to give up its constant search for the “new” and reflect on how existing successful processes can be institutionalized. She sees the (long existing, but little accepted) field of protest and social movement research as particularly useful for the Great Transformation. **STÜTZEL**, however, saw the further funding of research and science at such a considerable level as problematic and made an appeal for similarly high funding for practice-oriented pioneers.

The intensive and critical panel on the role of academia left little time for a critical discussion of the role of pioneers themselves. All of the panelists confirmed the significant role of pioneers of change in pushing the Great Transformation; in **STÜTZEL**'s words “a community of pioneers can make miracles happen.” They were described as a remarkable source of innovation and inspiration.

**HUTMACHER** granted that while pioneers have the ability to inspire change, they are less suited to stabilize and institutionalize new paradigms. It is just as important that science and government use these impulses to develop a long-term model.

Following the panel discussion, the audience was encouraged to actively participate—a reoccurring trend throughout the entire symposium. After an interactive explanation of the the “Wheel of Sustainability,” a model for creating a culture of sustainability proposed by RIC participants took part in a “Fair Trade” World Café entitled “Transformation to a Culture of Sustainability.” In small groups, participants reflected on their own role and the role of pioneers in bringing about the transformation. The presence of representatives from politics, science, and academia made for differentiated contributions and engaging conversations. Next, the groups shared their opinions on the attributes of effective pioneers and the various methods by for supporting pioneers.

In the late afternoon session, participants had the opportunity to get to know different types of pioneers in panels on, first, ecovillages and commons and secondly, energy cooperatives and transition towns. Panel A1, organized and moderated by **MARCUS ANDREAS**, focused on the goals and scope of ecovillages, as well as the current state of the research on this topic. **MICHAEL WÜRFEL** described his experience as a citizen of an ecovillage, and **VERANA HOLZ** discussed the movement from an academic perspective. Panel B2, organized by **DENIS NEUMÜLLER**, began with an introduction to the “commons” movement from **FREDERIKE HABERMANN**. In the second half, the audience has the opportunity to learn more about concrete examples in personal conversations with representatives of various commons projects.

In the second round of panels, **SARAH DEBOR** and **ANGELA POHLMANN** organized a traditional panel discussion about energy cooperatives, Panel A2. The discussants were **MICRO BEISHEIM** from an energy cooperative in Hamburg (Kultur-und-Energie-Bunker-Altona-Projekt e.V. / Energiegenossenschaft EnergieNetz Hamburg eG), **IRIS DEGENHARDT-MEISTER** from

an energy cooperative in Wolfhagen (BürgerEnergieGenossenschaft Wolfhagen eG), and **AMANDA GROSCKE** from an association on decentralized energy technology (Kompetenznetzwerk dezentrale Energietechnologien e.V.). In Panel B2 **GESA MASHKOWSKI**—the organizer, **GERD WESSLING**, and **MATTHIAS WANNER** illustrated the concept and current state of research on transition towns, which led to a lively discussion.

At the end of the evening the group reassembled for what was referred to as "scientific theater." Guided by the Forum theater group **ACT BACK**, the topics of the day were interactively brought to the stage. The actors picked up the challenge of the desire and demand for a transdisciplinary discussion, and contributed to the discussion on the Great Transformation via improvisational theater. In a very successful sketch, **ACT BACK** delivered an amusing metaphor for the challenge of climate change: in a country terrorized by a dragon, the king and his counselor desperately tried to win a farmer over to their plan, putting an end to the terror of the dragon by removing its food source. After long, critical research the counselor discovered that the dragon feeds in particular on potatoes (and potato-eating people). Tragically, the potato makes of the center of the kingdoms economy and culture. The only thing the dragon is not interested in eating is cabbage. In this respect, the king sees "no alternative" to transforming the potato economy into a cabbage economy. The farmer refuses this proposal, and referring to the counselor as a "statistics witch" he claims, "A life without potatoes is not a life." What happens now? The play was very positively received and its metaphor together with its open end was a constant theme during the remaining events.

On the morning of the second day, the discussion revolved around the role of academia as an intermediary in the Great Transformation. The session was opened by doctoral students from the Heinrich Böll Foundation's research cluster "Transformation." The students inspired further discussion through three skits on the aforementioned topic. As one of the "key listeners," **UWE SCHNEIDEWIND** argued that academia has a very important role to play in the Great Transformation. The main purpose of transformation research is to identify and describe models of change (transformation) in society; the main challenge there within is to enable interdisciplinary exchange through the integration of knowledge.

**HARALD WELZER** followed with the argument that the ability of academia to bring out change is overrated. It is a mistake to think that science is original and innovative. The influential changes and transformation of the past did not emerge from science. This poses the questions: How did science succeed in categorizing itself as the origin of change, and what needs to be altered to truly produce valuable output? **WELZER** claimed that academia cannot itself to be static and demand transformation from society at the same time. Rather, if academia truly wants to contribute to the Great Transformation, it must display the ability to reflexively change itself. In defense of academia,

**SCHNEIDEWIND** argued that change in the past has, indeed, been driven by science, as it is science that is known for questioning accepted structures in society and suggesting alternatives. He beseeched academia to return to this role.

During a round of questions, the audience and the panelists discussed the role of social power relations in science. What do these mean for transformation research, as well as for the possibilities of scientific pioneers and their responsibility to research and teach? While **SCHNEIDEWIND** described transformation research as a tough but necessary struggle against social power relations and called for a much stronger commitment in this field, **WELZER** drew a different conclusion: change and transformation cannot come from within, but only by getting out of the current system of academia and developing a "counter academic world."

Following this very interesting discussion, research projects and strategies, as well as conducive conditions for pioneers, were discussed with the audience. Afterwards, the participants were invited to participate at the "Market of Opportunities." Inspiring mutual exchange, participants were encouraged to set up stands to present their own project, such as the RCC "Environment and Society Portal." Particularly popular was the stand "real laboratories" proposed by **SCHNEIDEWIND** and **WAGNER**. Ad-hoc projects evolved out of five of these groups and were presented at the end of the symposium.

The event concluded with a feedback round for pioneers, moderated by **BJÖRN MÜLLER** (ACT BACK), with three experts, **STEFFI OBER**, **KARIN BOSCHERT**, and **JÖRG MAYER-RIES**. The five groups joined together under the heading "real laboratories" and will present their results at the next event, "Pioneers of Change 2.0," as the results of the evaluation clearly showed a strong desire for a sequel to this event.

-Rachel Shindelar