

**Benedikt Schmid**, *Making Transformative Geographies: Lessons from Stuttgart's Community Economy*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020. ISBN: 978-3-8376-5140-9 (paper); ISBN: 978-3-8394-5140-3 (ebook)

As scholars and activists, we are often presented with choosing between radical politics and compromise, reform or rupture, anti-capitalism or capitalism, degrowth or barbarism (Latouche 2009). But what if the road towards a degrowth agenda entails a more complex interplay of communities, use of technology, entrepreneurship, and radical political approaches where strategies and compromises ought to be found for transformative action? The Covid-19 health crisis is unfolding, giving way to a serious socio-economic crisis where inequality and precarity remain key elements of the current growth-oriented paradigm. In the background of this scenario, climate change and biodiversity loss move forward silently, as if they were relieved forces gladly letting more immediate threats dominate daily narratives. Amidst this context, sober examination and engagement with community economies and grassroots innovations, their strategies, constraints, and potentials for scaling, becomes critical for transformative radical politics.

*Making Transformative Geographies: Lessons from Stuttgart's Community Economy* provides a valuable addition to the growing body of literature of degrowth, alternative economies, and transformative geographies. Benedikt Schmid investigates the practices, engagements, politics, and challenges of 24 eco-social organizations and projects in the German city of Stuttgart. Whilst looking at the daily activities of these groupings, the author connects these sustainability efforts with broader discussions and debates around how to effectively organize, mobilize, and inspire real change. This volume will find a readership amongst scholars, activists, and those interested in post-capitalist possibilities and degrowth perspectives. Far from being a merely hopeful analysis on how to scale up local green and social initiatives, the book makes a conscious decision to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016). It contributes to emancipatory research by leaving no stone unturned when looking at limitations, potentials, and shortcomings of these geographies.

The first two parts of the book make conceptual connections between various strands of literature and theory. For those interested in a thorough review of critical literatures

discussing sustainable development, degrowth, postcapitalism, community economies, economic diversity, and scale, these sections prove useful and thought-provoking. With the ambition of problematizing and advancing some of these concepts, the author makes poignant links which will later on feed into his theoretical contribution to “socio-spatial degrowth strategies”. But amidst the various perspectives presented, there one that stands out. The conceptual and activist tradition of degrowth is central to the book’s argument, which foregrounds the theoretical approach and is key in his aforementioned contribution around transformative strategies.

The author makes a key differentiation between transformation and transition, which justifies not only the title but also the author’s political stance. Schmid argues that transition puts more focus on its directionality, often neglecting the politics shaping such crossover. Instead, transformation has less of an end goal and sheds light onto changing processes and the capacity of various actors to interact with each other to shift practices and ideas. Schmid then argues that “[t]ransition without transformation runs the risk of being apolitical or ontologically naïve. Transformation without transition, on the other hand, might lack practicability and clarity” (p.68). This quotation equally encapsulates the author’s ambition with the book, merging radical theoretical concepts with day-to-day practices of communities and eco-social enterprises in order to advance tangible strategies towards a politics of fundamental change.

This notion of transformation implies not only focusing on macro-societal changes, the effects of policy, or how to face capital’s reform, but rather pays attention to the small processes that may configure transformative action. It is this interest in practices and performativity which leads the author to ground his approach in practice theory. Inspired by the writings of Theodore Schatzki, Andreas Reckwitz, and Elizabeth Shove, the author makes use of practice theory by engaging in the dynamic processes of activity. Practice theories stress the importance of grounding ontology in process of practice. That is, understanding the social as a constellation of routinized behaviors, an assemblage of the interplay between human bodies, artifacts, meanings, and know-hows. This equally connects with J.K. Gibson-Graham and colleagues’ (2013) proposal that looking at social and material activities opens a

possibility to move away from capital-centrism by focusing on practices of community economies.

This practice theory approach, combined with an ethnographic methodology based on interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, constitutes the research design of this volume. Focusing on routinized diverse performances while taking part in them equally makes this methodological contribution a scholar-activist approach. Insights from a variety of Stuttgart's community economy organizations are thus presented: repair cafés, open workshops, skill-sharing associations, open source collectives, food sharing groups, consumer-producer cooperatives, sustainable and slow technology organizations, associations promoting bicycle use, circular economy and recycling schemes. These projects are “interconnected and form a pool of common resources, including skills, knowledge, contacts and a workforce that can be tapped into in case of need” (p.208). The plethora of organizations are operating in an otherwise highly commodified and profit-oriented city, known for the presence of prominent high-tech and automobile companies. When dwelling on the day-to-day activities of these organizations, the alternative perspective becomes visible. Accounts of how these economies are based on trust, motivated by generating community solutions, and fueled by values of sustainability and cooperation, demonstrate how they are cultivated. Particularly within the context of a for-profit, high-tech German city, these examples show that things can be done differently. This in turn also nurtures the individual's sense of community by also “challenging hopelessness [which] is a key aspect in the development of alternatives” (p.192). Yet the analysis complicates the picture in constructive ways. Rather than merely praising the open-source, repairing, cycling, and altruist cooperation efforts of this network of community and sustainability inspired projects, the manuscript turns to the challenges, constraints, and compromises that these organizations face.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 demonstrate that economic alternatives face daily struggles not only to sustain their practices and thus exist, but also to maintain coherence within their own values and goals. A participant of “Relumity”, an organization dedicated to the development of sustainable and repairable LED lights, puts it succinctly: “If you don't want to take part in this game, you are not competitive. It's impossible! Not that we are looking for

competition, but that is what is demanded from us” (p.198). Several of the accounts of the various eco-social enterprises of Stuttgart showcase their difficulty in navigating a for-profit world, being forced to adopt mindsets and practices clashing with their progressive and environmentally friendly aspirations. A key contribution of *Making Transformative Geographies* thus lies in exploring how daily strategies to get institutional support, develop business and political alliances, and make necessary compromises and concessions, can pave the way to understand the various strategies towards degrowth transformation. As per the book’s analysis, not all of Stuttgart’s community economy organizations overtly advocate degrowth (though many do), but the author is clearly interested in looking at them from this angle. Clearly, there are many organizations that are presented here, all having varying degrees of radical transformative ambitions and strategies.

Schmid then identifies three different types of organizations according to their compromises and strategies: symbiotic organizations (more market-oriented); interstitial organizations (non-profit projects wary of compromise, and striving to maintain their alterity); and pragmatic organizations (which cooperate with market and state institutions in a more cautious and calculated way). Schmid is most certainly skeptical about green capitalism and eco-entrepreneurial approaches, and rather sympathetic to more radical eco-social attitudes. However, he convincingly describes how the strategies and degrowth practices of different approaches have transformative power. Degrowth practices are then “conventionalized patterns of activity that reflectively relate to practices’ broader alignments in ways that found the assumption that these activities have an effect in line with degrowth’s principles” (p.255). And it is the interplay of these, with market and state institutions and logics, that results in concessions and compromises that nonetheless configure strategies for a transformative and radical agenda.

Schmid’s conceptual proposition of “socio-spatial degrowth strategies” builds on this understanding of degrowth practices that operate within three different axes of a three-dimensional cube: the strategic (Symbiotic, Interstitial, Ruptural and Reproduction strategies); the social (Economy, Governance, Communal, Subjectivity and Technology); and the spatial (Scale, Place, Territory and Network). The different axes connect at different levels, thus laying out the various possibilities, elements, and scale-abilities that each project

has. This delineates a multiplicity of degrowth strategies at different levels. The combinations of these different strategies, social elements, and spatialities set a path to a different understanding of the possibilities of transformation. This comes across as more than a theoretical tool for analyzing community economies. It is instead a geographical approach that seeks to enrich simplistic views of transformative projects and implicitly lays a template of strategies for radical praxis.

One of this book's intended strengths may also be considered its vulnerability, however. While the author's extensive theoretical contributions do lend this volume a degree of authority, there is also an argument to be made that, in some places, this very abundance of theory obscures or detracts from the author's central arguments. Some of the intricate theoretical connections made in the first parts of the book seem less crucial later on.

The book is reminiscent of post-capitalist (Chatterton and Pusey 2019; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013), commoning (De Angelis 2017; Linebaugh 2010), and post-Marxist (Hardt and Negri 2017) analyses that see the capacity and potential of day-to-day praxis and small acts as the starting point for an emancipatory degrowth transformation. Yet, the volume develops an attentiveness to the limits and challenges of such alternatives which is not only a reminder of the difficulty of such an endeavor. It is also an encouragement to us all to engage with such tensions in order to find strategies for socio-spatial transformation within a degrowth agenda. By looking in depth at these eco-social organizations, this book gives "careful hope" and carves strategies for radical trajectories, becoming an important addition to discussions around degrowth and post-capitalist geographies.

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