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## **A new Audacity of Imagination: Envisioning Sustainable Inclusion – Transforming toward new Patterns – Practicing Heterotopic Organizing**

“Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination.”

John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 1929

### **Abstract**

Starting from the re-imagination of sustainable futures, the paper asks how we can transform collaboration practices into new and inclusive patterns to shape the future. This paper focuses on discourse agents who have reimagined how to live together, conduct business, and shape politics in societies from an organizational-education and discourse-analytical perspectives. Their ideas and rationalities can be traced back to the educational philosopher John Dewey. Today, social movement organizations such as the German-speaking economic democratic network Economic Change (Netzwerk Oekonomischer Wandel (NOW)) seek new ways to achieve the “great transformation.” By designing, testing, and disseminating alternative future patterns of social coexistence, the network must learn how to make different positions and strategies productive. Using the pattern language of commoning, it employs a set of tools that can help to anchor new practices of “heterotopic organizing” in everyday life.

Ausgehend vom Neu-Imaginieren nachhaltiger Zukünfte fragt der Beitrag danach, wie wir unsere Praxis der Zusammenarbeit zu neuen und inklusiven Mustern der Zukunftsgestaltung transformieren können. Aus organisationspädagogisch-diskursanalytischer Perspektive finden wir Diskursakteure, die das Zusammenleben, das Wirtschaften und das politische Gestalten in unseren Gesellschaften neu denken schon bei dem Bildungsphilosophen Dewey. Heute sind es Soziale Bewegungs-(organisationen) wie das wirtschaftsdemokratische Netzwerk Ökonomischer Wandel (NOW), das nach neuen Wegen hin zur ‚großen Transformation‘ sucht. Indem es alternative Zukunftsmuster des gesellschaftlichen Zusammenlebens entwirft, erprobt und verbreitet, muss es zugleich lernen, differente Positionen und Strategien produktiv zu machen.

Mit der Mustersprache des Commoning nutzt das Netzwerk ein Instrumentarium, das dabei helfen kann, neue Praktiken ‚heterotopischen Organisierens‘ im Alltag zu verankern.

## 1 Introduction: A New Audacity of Imagination

John Lennon’s song “Imagine” connects listeners to the power of imagination and evokes images of alternative societal futures in our minds (Weber & Heidelmann 2022 forthcoming a). Similarly, the title of the book *Change at the Speed of Imagination* (Magruder Watkins a. o. 2011) informs readers that organizational and societal change occurs at the level of imagination. Whether Morgan’s creative organization theory (1989; 1993; 1998) or Cooperrider’s root metaphor interventions (1999, 2000), imagining alternatives to the given presence is regarded as central for change. In the context of societal and organizational change, positive imagining as a projective practice enables positive action and dynamizes social and organizational systems into alternative solutions. This affirmative cognitive ecology not only supports cultural vitality in organizing but, as a metacognitive ability, it also contributes to transforming society toward new patterns.

According to this perspective, organizations are artifacts of affirmative thinking (Cooperrider 1999, 118-121). With their prophetic, poetic, and normative qualities, images can open and transform basic organizational metaphors. Such collective projections function as both an imaginative and “subversive” strategy in the democratic transformation of organizations (Bruck & Weber 2000). This perspective not only applies to organizations but also to societies. According to Castoriadis (1975), societies are built on collective and reproductive imaginaries, which may also become transformational imaginaries.

### 1.1 Organizational learning: Analyzing visibilities and speakabilities

Over nearly two decades, the field of organizational education has emerged (Göhlich et al. 2018) and international debates on organizational learning have been widened and discussed from an educational perspective. Organizational education perspectives are interested in learning in, of, and between organizations (Göhlich et al. 2014; Weber 2020). Within these debates, critical research perspectives have established (Weber & Wieners 2018). Following a poststructuralist Foucauldian perspective, organizations are not neutral or simply functional. Instead, they act according to sets of knowledge, which are related to power. From a discourse-analytic organizational-education perspective, organizations (and their representatives) are seen as epistemic terrains through which discursive bodies of knowledge ‘flow’. Understood as discursive practices, business, social science, and organizational education rationalizations

of change are practices “that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1981, 74). Organizations in this sense are constantly actualizing discourses in their discursive practice (Weik & Lang 2005; Marshak & Grant 2008; Weber & Wieners 2018). Institutional knowledge orders are to be understood as orders of collective seeing, sensing, and thinking. An organizational, aesthetic, and visual organizational education perspective is interested in the institutionalized “gaze” (Wieners & Weber 2019). Historical and spatially situated epistemic practices imply specific “visibilities and speakabilities” of and within organizing. This perspective contributes not only to an epistemology of the gaze (Weber & Heidelmann 2022 forthcoming a) but also to a perspective of organizational design, intending to intervene into organizational orders of the gaze (Weber 2022 forthcoming).

## 1.2 Intervening in collective imaginaries and orders of the gaze

From a collective imaginaries perspective organizational learning is analyzed and theorized as an aesthetic and performative practice. Thus, organizations, which are understood as imaginary institutions, oscillate between “recognizing seeing” and “re-seeing,” according to Imdahl (1996). How can existing power-knowledge structures be addressed to challenge and change prevailing “story lines?” How can the “ways things are experienced and understood” (Marshak & Grant 2008, 12) be transformed in organizations? How can dialogical and artefact-based strategies of imagining contribute to intervening in given orders of the gaze?

An aesthetic perspective on organizing is interested in analyzing and transforming the collective imaginaries, which constitute self-concepts and collective identities. From such a visual discourse perspective (Weber & Wieners 2018), this paper sees organizational transformation as intervention in collective imaginaries. According to the notion that “every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination,” the educational philosopher John Dewey (1929) regarded imagination as audacity and as a core level of collective transformation.

## 1.3 Inclusion as counter-imaginary: Toward another “great transformation”

Polanyi (1944) originally discussed the “great transformation” toward the industrial society. Today, his concept is relevant for the historical threshold of the “Anthropocene” and the evolution of the mind toward alternative collective imaginaries, which Kaufman viewed as “cultural memes” (Kaufman 2012, 129) and “culture jamming” toward alternative economic models. These audacious alternative imaginations of the future would overcome different systems of domination, such as sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and their intersections (*ibid.*, 134-141). The new “great transformation” needs an integral democratization of our societies toward sustainability (WBGU 2011).

Such an integral concept of inclusion can be understood as a discursive “counter-imaginary” against exclusive and excluding normative orders. The rationality of exclusion reproduces in the “normal” daily life practice of the institutions and organizations in so called “organization societies” (Perrow 1991; 1989). Therefore, the current paper reflects on the transformation of collective imaginaries and “story lines” toward inclusive patterns and practices that integrate social, political, and economic dimensions. These alternative societal models of integral inclusion are grounded in alternative ways of seeing, imaginaries, strategies, and alternative practices of organizing.

#### 1.4 Heterotopic organizing – Who speaks?

As an alternative imaginary that encompasses societal, democratic, and economic notions, inclusion can be seen as a “heterotopia” (Foucault 2005), which suspends, neutralizes, and inverts the given normative order of exclusion (Weber 2020; Weber & Heidelmann 2022). Societal and institutional normalities of exclusion reproduced in organizations may not only be relevant as entities of reproduction. Through heterotopic imaginaries, strategies, and practices, organizing can contribute to transforming collective images and practices. Following Foucault’s question “Who speaks?” (Foucault 1992), the paper reflects on the potential to transform collective imaginaries toward the next “great transformation” of sustainable inclusion.

To this end, we begin with critiques of exclusion, which had already been formulated by Dewey at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He criticized the separation of the social, political, and economic spheres. Against the backdrop of multiple crises and reproductive collective imaginaries (Castoriadis 1975), he envisioned an interconnected and transformational inclusive society. Such a “great society” would constantly design itself through experience-based, experimental, and aesthetic practices of collective learning (Dewey 1964).

Today, social movement organizations (SMOs; Schröder 2018) implicitly connect to Dewey’s re-imagination and re-thinking of alternative patterns of future social coexistence. They refer to the democratization of societies (Della Porta 2020) and contribute to designing a socially, politically and economically integrated concept of sustainable inclusion. From a Foucauldian perspective, they are discussed in this paper as agents that transform the discourse toward concepts of inclusion and sustainability. Combining social and societal life, democracy, and the economy, the sustainability and degrowth movements offer alternative imaginaries of integral and sustainable inclusion.

#### 1.5 Transforming ways of seeing and speaking

The german speaking *Netzwerk Oekonomischer Wandel* (NOW; Network on Economic Transformation) attempts to transform ways of seeing and speaking, envision alternative inclusive and sustainable futures, and re-Imagine and re-shape

collective imaginaries. At the same time, it must balance its own diversity and needs to establish democratic practices. What are the collective imaginaries and practices that support democracy as a lived experience?

NOW uses the *pattern language of commoning* to support its transformational strategy and organizational practices, which may also be helpful for other organizations and institutions. It can support experimentation and reflect organizational daily life practices, which contribute to either reproductional or transformational rationalities and path-finding. *How can we re-imagine and re-shape our collective imaginaries and move toward a new “great transformation” (WBGU 2011) of sustainable inclusion?*

We begin this journey with Dewey’s integral imaginaries of a democratized society in Chapter 2. Then, SMOs are discussed as modern agents that re-imagine societies toward an integral vision of inclusion in Chapter 3. The goals of NOW are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents the challenges of diversity in networked organizing and the card deck and design artefact of the “pattern language of commoning” (PLC). This practice-orienting toolset (Helfrich & Petzold 2020) aims to contribute to re-patterning, transforming, and re-organizing societal and organizational practices. As a meta-cognitive toolset for self-democratization, this card deck of alternative practices may contribute to transforming the organizational practice of “heterotopic organizing” toward sustainable inclusion.

## 2 “Communitize!” A Genealogical Journey into Re-Imagining Society and Organizing

Where does this alternative storyline of democracy as lived experience begin? Where can we find the statements and spaces where “a certain practice takes place” (Foucault 1973, 297) in language, imaginaries, and material settings? The power-knowledge that materializes in ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, and acting constitutes symbolic orders. It represents forms of government and shapes the way, how the human being systematically is addressed by institutions. While Foucault’s “archaeology of knowledge” provides a methodology for analyzing knowledge orders, his genealogical perspective focuses on points of origins and mechanisms and how knowledge makes collective subjects (subjectivation) (Vogl 2008, 255). Foucault in his work discussed collective subject positions of exclusion, like the deviant prisoner or the hysterical woman, which as such are produced in public and academic discourses. Contrary to the subjects of exclusion, other discourses imagine subjects of inclusion, like Dewey’s democracy experiencing subject.

In Dewey’s work, the origins and mechanisms of this alternative way of organizing societies, organizations, and ourselves can already be observed. Dewey problematized the challenges of exclusion and the need for integral inclusion. In his major

work on political theory, *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1927; Jörke & Selk 2020, 79), he problematized the following issues at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

- the division of society,
- the feeling of being at the mercy of others,
- the outsized influence of bureaucracy,
- the power of large organizations and influence of financial capital on policy-making,
- the lack of public representation of the people,
- the feeling of marginalization among subaltern populations, and
- the risk of rising political apathy and frustration.

By stating that the only “cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy” (Dewey 1996, 127), Dewey called for the democratization of all spheres of public activity. Opposed to a formal concept of democracy, he viewed democracy as a collective social practice that permeates all spheres of society. As an interactive practice, “communitizing” (*Vergemeinschaften*) is the idea of community life itself. From this integral and inclusive perspective, citizens themselves must achieve democracy. The democratic ideal is seen as “already at work in every personality, and must be trusted to care for itself” (1888/1969, 243). As a space of “shared and common experience” (Dewey 1964, 121), democracy is understood from an experimental perspective as a “way of resolving conflicts, coordinating actions, and institutional experimentation” (Jörke & Selk 2020, 81) based on active consent. Here, the public sphere is re-imagined in a radical, flexible, and action-oriented manner. Experimentally discovering the fluid boundaries between the public and the private, all areas of life are understood as structurally politicized. This alternative imaginary requires intelligent problem-solving and the education of the “great community,” a collective re-imagining of the political toward a “great democracy,” the democratic control of the economy (Jörke & Selk 2020, 84) and an integral concept of inclusion.

Today, this idea of radically democratizing all spheres of society, politics, the economy, and education toward inclusion can be found on the surface of present discourses. Modern SMOs aim to transform the dominant imaginaries of divided social, political, and economic life. Therefore, the International Futures Forum (Sharpe & Hodgson 2019) generally views SMOs as transformational forces and a turbulent field of transitory activities. While a “first horizon” of “business as usual” only allows incremental changes, SMOs are part of a “second horizon” wanting to shape societies and organizations toward alternative futures. According to Sharpe and Hodgson (2019), they act against “horizon one” in the here and now and shape societies and organizations by anticipating an alternative future (a “third horizon”).

### 3 Transgressing the Boundaries of Dominant Imaginaries? The Discursive Potential of Social Movement Organizations

Problematizing the multiple crises of social, economic, and political life, transformational SMOs act from the margins and aim to shift their work to the center. Because they re-imagine ways of living together, conducting business, and shaping politics, they can be seen as discourse agents. As visionary social forces, they oppose unquestioned normalities, claim alternative futures, formulate “counter-strategies” to the given social, political and economic conditions (Weber 2018). They aim to transform dominant knowledge orders. Their strategies may range from influencing collective opinion and decision making to scandalizing and mobilizing the public through performative strategies, networking, legal decision making, and even academic knowledge production.

Against dominant patterns of functioning and existence in societies, which the International Futures Forum (Sharpe & Hodgson 2019) refers to as “horizon one” (H1), SMOs act against dominant rationalities of exclusion, representation and growth in our systems. They oppose the principles of function, order, and effects of “horizon one” by moving beyond the traditional incremental change patterns. While “horizon one” maintains dominant patterns and consolidates the existing system, many SMOs fight for fundamental changes. Against only incremental changes of socially, politically, technologically and historically inspired developments, these SMOs aim to truly re-imagine systems and ways of thinking. In connection to Dewey’s idea of an integral transformation toward inclusion and sustainability, degrowth movements and NOW address the social, political, and economic dimensions of this integral democratization of all spheres of life.

#### 3.1 Re-imagining the democratic transformation of social, economic, and political life

Calling for the transition to a post-industrial age, the broad degrowth movement promotes the socio-economic transformation and radical democratization of social, political, and economic life. Opposing an “imperial way of life” (Brand & Wissen 2017), such SMOs address serious socio-ecological-economic problems; the rights of the earth; and future generations. By criticizing a structurally exclusionary, eurocentric, and patriarchal democracy, they aim to establish a basic council democracy. In addition, these SMOs oppose the structural exploitation of other species (Lorey 2020) and a linear model of progress toward economic growth; thus, they fundamentally re-imagine societies and organizations. Schmelzer and Vetter (2019) identified seven streams of critique and re-imagination:



1. *Ecological critiques* view economic growth as destructive to natural resources and humanity. They claim reductionist strategies and argue for the reduction of Co2 emissions.
2. *Socio-economic* approaches refer to alternative models of welfare and human wellbeing. In this context, “degrowth” refers to the disconnect between a higher GDP and human happiness or wellbeing.
3. *Culture critical* approaches address cultural patterns of consumption and alienation, the subjective limits of constant acceleration, and alternatives such as mindfulness and wellbeing.
4. *Critiques of Capitalism* problematize the growth dependency of current systems, whereby the market is the only relevant sphere and the practice of capitalism entails constant acceleration.
5. *Feminist approaches* discuss the crisis of reproduction within capitalist systems. Care and time for care are not represented. As a result, the cost-free resource of female labor is part of an “invisible” and devalued shadow economy.
6. *Industrialism* and critiques of industrialization oppose technicist approaches to problem solving. They refer to deficient infrastructures, such as the division of labor, cultural rationalization, a mechanized factory system, technocratic problem solving, bureaucracy, and an overregulated administration.
7. *South-North-critical approaches* view economic growth in the Global North as being based on the exploitation of the Global South. Proponents of such approaches criticize alleged civilizational notions of development and progress.

All of the above streams of degrowth SMOs re-imagine social and solidarity economies using varying imaginaries and strategies. Because all of them question dominant narratives and re-imagine inclusive and sustainable futures, they can be seen as the visionary forces toward the “third horizon,” which envisages, anticipates, and leads the way toward alternative futures (Sharpe & Hodgson 2019).

#### **4 Envisioning Sustainable Societies, Economies, and Democracies: Transforming Toward New Patterns**

NOW was established in 2020 as a strategic alliance. As a SMO uniting different movements and streams in the degrowth movement, it is a central “meta”-agent. As a network of networks, NOW aims to achieve the democratization of the economy, society, and the state. It suggests an integral concept of inclusion and sustainability; at the same time, it must integrate the diversity within its own ranks. NOW models socio-economic transformation and represents a variety of positions toward sustainable and inclusive futures.

#### 4.1 Modelling socio-economic transformation

NOW gathers various socio-ecological-economic movements. It operates in the space between reform, transformation, and revolution in the current economy. NOW focuses on degrowth, the commons, and collaborative and co-creative economies. Envisioning an inclusive social economy, the network claims a fundamental reorientation and seeks to achieve “a good life for all” in “an ecological, equitable and democratic economic system.” All member SMOs agree on three goals:

- to “extend the commons,”
- to “align markets with the common good,” and
- to “democratize the state.”

These goals are further explained on NOW’s website:<sup>1</sup>

- *Extending the commons* means supporting “self-organizing and meaningful work beyond market and state” and producing what is needed “to meet our needs” in peer-to-peer processes. Inclusion is framed as dignity for all. Aligning markets with the common good means promoting “diversity and democratic enterprises of appropriate scale.”
- *Democratizing the state* means democratizing all areas of life to “reconfigure state power itself.” Commons-oriented market strategies aim to provide “public services that enable participation for all” and prevent structural exclusion.
- *A good life for all* means transforming the economy according to the “ecological sensitivity of the planet.” “Basic material security in life-friendly neighbourhoods” would enable “more time for education, leisure and play,” “care-work,” and togetherness based on solidarity, “human creativity and cooperation.” A “genuinely free economy” is envisioned as “regenerative ecosystems, social cohesion and real democracy.”

#### 4.2 Quo vadis? Varying imaginaries within NOW

NOW’s multidimensional values include

- global ecological justice and the claim not to externalize and “socialize” costs caused by microeconomic and “individualized” profit-making;
- global justice and the claim that the Global North must limit its (over-)use of natural resources and material throughput;
- the abandonment of models of growth; and
- the transformation of material and technical infrastructure, societal and social institutions, mental infrastructures, and economic systems.

As an alliance between academics, grassroots-initiatives, economy, and civil society, NOW represents multiple contexts, policies, and strategies in all fields of

<sup>1</sup> <https://netzwerk-oekonomischer-wandel.org/>

social, economic, and political life. While some of the network's partners advocate for economic degrowth, others work toward transforming society as a whole and advocate for a radically smaller resource throughput (Schmelzer & Vetter 2019, 149). Representing different streams of the degrowth movement, NOW addresses diverse notions of integral inclusion and sustainability. Moreover, it has established different concepts of audacious envisioning, organizing, and problem solving. Some of NOW's partners are institution-oriented, while others are subsistence-oriented, commons or alternative economy-oriented, feminist, or critical of capitalism and globalization. However, all partners share a

- socially,
- politically, and
- economically integrated concept of inclusion.

Based on this common understanding, NOW must integrate a broad range of conceptual approaches. In the following paragraphs, the conceptual diversity of members' approaches, perspectives, and transformational strategies is briefly discussed.

Representing the *institution-oriented stream* in NOW, the *Economy for the Common Good (ECG)* was founded and institutionalized by Austrian author and political activist Christian Felber (2018) in 2010. Targeting private firms, administrations, cities, and individuals, ECG aims to strengthen reflexivity toward ethical strategies for a sustainable economy. ECG has established a strong organizational structure, with regional, national and global chapters. Its strategy is geared toward mainstreaming. Using specific tools, ECG supports sustainability-based certification and accreditation by "measuring" organizations' ecological, social, democratic, and ethical "footprint"<sup>2</sup>.

Representing a *sufficiency-oriented stream* in NOW, *Solidarity Economy* aims to create local and decommercialized economies of subsistence at the local level. NOW member Dagmar Embshoff is a regional and cooperative project developer and an active practitioner in cultural projects. Solidarity Economy's approach is based on human needs and follows the principle of sufficiency economies. This approach focuses on community use and regional circuits of production and consumption and envisions a social and solidarity economy (Elsen 2017).

Representing the *commons-oriented stream*, Silke Helfrich was a NOW partner until her death in November 2021. Inspired by the work of Nobel Prize-winning political scientist Elinor Ostrom (1990), Helfrich grounded her work on the eight design principles, developed by Ostrom. These principles might support shaping and to "govern" the commons (Ostrom 1990)<sup>3</sup>. While Ostrom discusses the com-

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ecogood.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Ostroms (1990) process patterns refer to dealing with boundaries, rules and communal decisions, as well as control of rule violations and graduated sanctions, conflict resolution mechanisms, recognition of rights and the establishment of polycentric governance.

mon as the natural resources like air, water and ground, Helfrich understood the commons from a social science perspective as the social practice of commoning. Commoning then is to be understood as a relational philosophy that re-imagines societal and organizational praxis (Helfrich & Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2012; Helfrich & Bollier 2019). Commoning represents a philosophy of sharing, as a relational praxis of human and non-human interaction. This ontological approach imagines humans as cooperative-social beings and seeks to establish fair and inclusive social relations between humans and nature. Commoning is understood as a social and relational practice of reflexive self-organization. Such self-organization spaces can be found in cooperatives, communities, and networks. They are regarded as alternative infrastructures in social, political, and economic life (Helfrich & Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2012, 66). Cooperatives, initiatives and SMOs are understood as visionary forces toward integral inclusion. Since their practice of self-organization is grounded on processes of self-transformation, reflexivity and collective learning are required.

Representing the *feminist stream* in NOW, Friederike Habermann is a proponent of the *care economy*. This stream views reproductive care as foundational to societal life and the economy. Habermann is a feminist, an economist and a historian. As a speaker of a culture of sharing, she intends to value and extend the care economy. In her book *Ecommony* (Habermann 2016), Habermann discusses poststructuralist-feminist perspectives, which integrate queer views and seek for non-patriarchal and non-capitalist economies. Habermann addresses the social and historical positionedness of subjectivities in processes of exclusion and inclusion. To establish an alternative economy (Habermann 2009) that overcomes the division of production and reproduction, she suggests a “care revolution” (Winker 2015). Such a new “care economy” (Winker 2021) would follow the principles of

- ownership rather than property (who needs and uses something instead of exclusion through buying and selling),
- sharing what one can,
- contribution rather than exchange (become active out of inner motivation, being safe, socially secured and having access to resources for a living), and
- openness and voluntariness.

Representing the *capitalism- and globalization-critical stream*, the author Matthias Schmelzer primarily embodies the academic faction within the network. As a member of the Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie (Conceptwork New Economy) and an academic at the University of Leipzig in Germany, he is an activist academic who envisions concrete utopian models of policy conceptualization, design, and strategies. These alternative models emerge from participatory co-creative processes in which SMOs, civil society organizations, and academia reflect and work together in future search workshops (Kuhnhehn et al 2020). As academics, Schmelzer and

Vetter (2019) relate and connect to multiple definitions and strategies within the different streams of the degrowth and alternative futures movements.

The *collaborative and co-creative economy stream* in NOW is represented by Thomas Dönnebrink, who works as a freelancer. He views “platform cooperativism” as a rising international movement. This approach focuses on peer-to-peer and commons-based peer production, knowledge, and digital commons. Dönnebrink promotes a concept of technological infrastructures that feature online platforms based on cooperative models and solidarity structures. These platforms may even lead to political power: cooperativism and the open source and open data and open knowledge movement aim to serve as a “directory for the online democratic ecosystem.” For example, peer productions such as Wikihouse or Wikipedia create post-capitalistic digital markets, much like community-supported agriculture. The platform movement views sustainability, openness, and solidarity as three interconnected values. These are supported through open digital spaces; Linux or Wikipedia are regarded as examples of such hyper-productive spaces of open contribution.

## 5 Toward New Horizons: Patterns of Heterotopic Organizing

According to the International Futures Forum (Sharpe & Hodgson 2019), innovation becomes transformative when transformational actors manage to orient their individual and collective efforts and concrete activities toward pattern changes. When they succeed in re-patterning dominant structures, cultures, and practices, they create societal alternatives instead of “more of the same.” From a power-knowledge critical perspective, societal and organizational patterns not only refer to concepts and strategies but also subjectivities, minds, thoughts, and practices. How can SMOs and NOW become game changers in societal, economic, and political discourses? How can a productive practice of egalitarian self-organization be successfully established (Paslack 1990, 289)? Although NOW addresses this new audacity of imagination and alternative practices of “heterotopic organizing,” it must contend with structural dilemmas that are typical in networks.

### 5.1 Challenges of organizing in partnerships, networks, and alliances

From an organizational education perspective, the field of network research provides insights on the general limits and pitfalls of organizing and governance in networks. Messner (1994) identified empirically grounded paradoxes that must be addressed to successfully organize in “heterotopic” alliances.

- *The big number problem* (ibid., 567): This refers to the number of actors; the higher the number of partners, the more multilateral coordination, negotiation, and bargaining are needed. Depending on the relations between partners

and agreements on and the acceptance of common standards and rules, network-based coordination may become functional or dysfunctional.

- *The time-dimension of decision making:* Since networks do not necessarily organize their interdependence in a sequential manner (e.g., coordinating projects via project plans), they depend on reciprocal interdependence, in which the decision making of one actor relates to the actions of other actors. This entails the necessity of coordination and adjustment (ibid., 571). Network research has shown that the interests of network actors are often not as oriented toward the long term as those of the network, which may lead to suboptimal decision making.
- *Institutional consolidation:* Empirical results have shown that network actors are often interested in stable structures of negotiation and cooperation. This longing for stability results in a tendency toward conflict avoidance and incremental change. Networks with a strong social cohesion support the praxis of a consensual culture. A strong social coherence may produce ingroup-outgroup thinking. The more stable network structure are, the more they will reproduce their path. However, Messner (1994, 572) viewed institutional consolidation as both a condition of and a risk for the functionality of networks.
- *Network coordination:* Decisions must connect to aspects of distributional justice. Networks tend to make suboptimal decisions to avoid disadvantaging their members. Over time, they stabilize relations between members. Investments in this cooperation cumulate and individual exit costs for members who leave the network increase, which often leads to an attitude of compromise.
- *Dilemma of negotiation.* According to Messner (1994), networks must contend with dilemmas. Thus, one challenge is how to balance open, fair, and trust-based strategies and how to deal with manipulative bargaining strategies. Constructive orientational patterns among cooperative members might be abused. What is regarded “successful” bargaining techniques in the light of individual interests might be detrimental to network interests and the network’s desired collaborative culture.
- *Unequal distribution of resources:* Networks must generally address the unequal distribution of resources, as they contribute to power structures. Unequally distributed resources of network partners and different power resources may lead to the acceptance or delegitimization of topics. It may lead to the blocking or support of themes and future developments.
- *Conflict and cooperation:* Networks are bound to experience structural tensions. The relations between partners are structurally conflictive. The conflict between cooperation and competition shows, that network governance is risky and network development may fail. Thus, network consultancy is relevant (Schwarz & Weber 2011) for the success of networks and strategic alliances.

As the example of NOW and structural tensions, dilemmas, and paradoxes demonstrate, working toward integral and “deep” inclusion requires significant effort.

NOW practices horizontal and democratic forms of governance and engages in collective action and active citizenship. To address its conceptual diversity and the challenges of networked organizing, NOW established commoning as a collective social practice. The Pattern Language of Commoning (PLC) was developed by Helfrich and David Bollier (2020). Its accompanying card deck is empirically grounded in over 400 interviews with activist commoners conducted by Helfrich. Based on this empirical research, she condensed “patterns,” which represent practices that are critical to success and form a new ontological framework of commoning. Therefore, PLC should be understood as a meta-communicative practice that spans the fields of

- social togetherness,
- self-organized development, and
- sustainable management in process (Helfrich & Bollier 2020; Helfrich & Petzold 2021).

The card deck supports reflection, knowledge sharing, and exploration of alternative social praxis patterns. When Helfrich was a member of NOW, the alliance used her toolkit to develop toward social connectedness, collective governance, and cooperation. Re-imagining societies and patterns of organizing, this toolkit for individual and collective transformation is briefly presented in the following section.

## 5.2 The pattern language of commoning: Potential for transformational practice

Helfrich and Bollier (2020) argued that autonomy and democracy are learned in relationships because they can be experienced and lived. According to the architect Christopher Alexander, patterns can be understood as tools that promote life. They can be used in many ways and are needed to shape a free, fair, and sustainable world. Since patterns contain proven experiential knowledge, they describe the essence of successful solutions to problems that may occur in comparable contexts. The complex interplay between context, problem, and solution is critical; thus, these three elements are never isolated from each other and are found in all 33 patterns that comprise PLC. Alexander, who co-wrote *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings Construction*, suggested the pattern “light from two sides in every room.” This pattern answers the question “what makes one space more alive than others?” From this perspective, contexts such as spaces within a building, are comparable. According to Alexander, it has been proven that people prefer to be in rooms in which light enters from two sides; by contrast, rooms in which light only enters from one side tend to remain unused and empty (Alexander et al. 1995, 811). The PLC card deck condensed the experiences of more than 400 interviewees from SMOs into 33 patterns, which aim to support sociality, cooperation, and co-production. PLC aims to transform collective imaginaries and support a prosocial, cooperative and democratic praxis in and of organizing. Given NOW’s structurally

conflictive setting and the collective challenges of any communicative situation in diverse settings, the card deck aims to re-imagine and support individual and collective reflexivity. It addresses the social, political, and economic life from an ontological perspective and based on an integral understanding of sustainability and inclusion. This deck of 33 reflection and orientation cards (Helfrich & Bollier 2020) encompasses illustrations, problem questions, short descriptions, examples, and connection patterns based on visual-linguistic illustrations of success-critical “process patterns.” In the following list, the 33 “best practices” of social togetherness, self-organization through peers, and caring and self-determined management are briefly described:

- *Social togetherness*: Cultivating common intentions and values, contributing without constraints, gently exercising reciprocity, trusting situated knowledge, deepening closeness to nature, communicating responsibly and empathetically, working on conflicts in a relationship-preserving way, establishing and maintaining rituals of togetherness, and reflecting on one’s governance.
- *Self-organization through peers*: Aligning together in diversity, sharing knowledge generously, being transparent in the space of trust, deciding collectively, surrounding the commons with semipermeable membranes, enabling horizontal encounters and relationships in and through organizational structures, building on heterarchy, observing rule compliance within the commons, comprehending and sanctioning rule violations, anchoring the relationality of having, interfering with confinements and appropriations, keeping the commons and commerce apart, and financing the commons appropriately.
- *Caring and self-determined management*: Generating and using together; recognizing work activity and (caring) for others with equal dignity; creating security, independent of money; sharing the production risk; using convivial tools; relying on community-supported infrastructures; creatively adapting and innovating; contributing and disseminating; pooling, capping, and dividing; pooling, capping, and apportioning; and trading with price sovereignty.

Since the PLC card deck addresses solution-oriented patterns which contribute to network governance reflexivity of initiatives, SMOs or cooperatives, it aims to achieve meta-communication. As an aesthetic artefact, it promotes a new frame of reference “among people and between people and the world” (Helfrich & Bollier 2020, 78). It targets sustainability innovation, collective understanding, and developing an ethical attitude of the common good (Helfrich & Petzold 2021). It aims to facilitate patterns of problem solving (Leitner 2015, 33) to promote ethical and process- and relationship-oriented attitudes and stances. As the patterns suggest a “best practice” to use, the patterns have a hypothetical character (Alexander & Ishikawa 1995). This hypothetical character supports their empirical and (research) methodical application.



Through its innovative approach, PLC may support the re-imagination of a social and cooperative praxis. Especially in structurally conflictive situations, it may draw individual and collective attention toward collective re-imagining and mutual relations. As a “creative program,” PLC may also contribute to individual, collective, and organizational learning.

The card deck provides access to the implicit knowledge of cooperating partners (Polanyi 1967, 14), supports perception (Helfrich & Bollier 2020, 104) and contributes to collective processes of understanding by articulating lived experience through a democratizing practice. It can also engage visual imaginations and support a space for deep reflection; support the individual and collective ability to perceive, notice, express and describe experiences; and clarify the transformation that takes place. Helfrich and Bollier (2020, 53f) assumed that PLC redirects consciousness by shifting attention from self-focus to the whole and allowing individuals to become co-creators of the social system, the initiative or the network involved. Therefore, as a new praxis of organizing, PLC can support transformational strategies toward the integral inclusion of the social, political, and economic spheres. Because the card deck is relatively new, empirical research is needed to analyze its effects. As an “organizing pattern,” it may transform the quality of conversations and self-organization (Wieners & Weber 2019).

## **6 Conclusion: Imaginary Organizing and Democracy as a Way of Life**

Because organizational education addresses learning “in, of and between organizations” and begins from a cultural and educational conception of organization (Göhlich et al. 2018), it aims to understand and shape discursive organizing (Weber 2020). According to a poststructuralist concept of organizing (Weik & Lang 2005; Weber & Wieners 2018), SMOs – especially NOW – were discussed as discourse agents that are moving toward a sustainable and inclusive socio-economic future. By outlining collective and individual alternative imaginaries and NOW’s collective practices, this paper described how SMOs – especially the broad and diverse streams of the degrowth movement – attempt to overcome the existing normalities of a separated world. At the same time, they must address the structural tensions inherent to network alliances. While contending with both structurally conflictive settings and accidents (such as Helfrich’s sudden death in November 2021), NOW continues to intervene in excluding normalities and discourses (Foucault 2005). By doing so, it re-imagines organizations and societies’ progress toward “Horizon 3.” Given the currently separate realms of society, democracy, and the economy, democratizing all spheres toward the integral concept of an inclusive and sustainable world remains paramount. Through its ontological toolkit,

PLC may contribute to establishing meta-communicative patterns. In the process, it may “re-invent” existing organizations (Laloux 2015). Dewey (1991) viewed the “creative democracy” as a “task before us.” Accordingly, it is up to us to establish “heterotopic organizing” toward sustainable – and integrally inclusive – futures.

*“Never believe any prediction that does not empower you.”*

Sean Stephenson

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