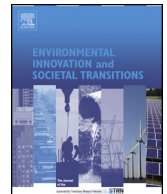




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Beyond deconstruction. a reconstructive perspective on sustainability transition governance

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews criticisms of sustainability transition studies, using transition management (TM) as a case study. While these criticisms have yielded theoretical progress, underlying epistemological issues remain. Contrasting the TM approach to complexity with other more deconstructive views on complexity, it becomes clear that some criticisms on TM are inherently based on a deconstructive questioning of whether complex systems can be influenced into a desired direction. The authors build on those critiques to argue that TM needs to clarify how (1) TM itself harbours deconstructive power (hitherto insufficiently specified), while (2) at the same time having an explicit ambition to 'go beyond' deconstruction. To that end, this paper proposes a 'reconstructive approach' as an epistemological grounding for transition studies. This reconstructive approach is elaborated on three grounds: (1) a research focus beyond 'is' versus 'ought' towards 'can be', (2) interpretative research and reflexivity, and (3) a 'phronetic' understanding of sustainability.

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1. Introduction

The field of transition studies has taken up one of the great challenges in social science: understanding structural change. Transitions are defined as non-linear processes of social change, in which societal systems are structurally transformed (Markard et al., 2012; Grin et al., 2010; Geels and Schot, 2007). A 'sustainability transition' generally refers to a "radical transformation towards a sustainable society as a response to a number of persistent problems confronting contemporary modern societies" (Grin et al., 2010:1). One of the central premises in transition studies is that persistent problems are symptoms of unsustainable societies, and that dealing with these persistent problems in order to enable more sustainable systems, requires system innovations in specific sub-systems, as well as transitions that transcend individual systems and comprise various system innovations at different scale-levels and over long-term periods of time (Loorbach and Rotmans and 2010). A transition is the result of 'co-evolution'; "when the interaction between societal subsystems influences the dynamics of the individual subsystems, leading to irreversible patterns of change" (Grin et al., 2010: 4).

The oldest strand of transition research has its intellectual roots in innovation studies, as found in social studies of technology, where the multi-level perspective (MLP) was proposed as a framework to understand how 'regular', incremental innovation was structured by a 'regime', while niche experiments, regime changes and long-term contextual changes could produce a transition (Rip and Kemp, 1998; Schot, 1998; Geels, 2005). While originally the focus was on transitions in socio-

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technical systems fulfilling specific societal needs (e.g. systems for mobility, energy, agriculture), recent developments have extended the notion to other units of analysis, (e.g. regions, cities – Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010; Smith et al., 2010) and to ‘reflexive’ governance for sustainable development (Voß et al., 2009). In terms of analytical focus, the understanding of *transition processes* can be distinguished from the understanding of *how actors (can) influence transition processes*: the first object of study is referred to as *transition dynamics*, the latter as *transition management* (Rotmans et al., 2001; Loorbach, 2007; Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010) *transition governance* (Voß and Kemp, 2006; Grin, 2010; Frantzeskaki et al., 2012) or *strategic niche-management* (Hoogma et al., 2002). Yet, while they may be analytically distinguished, their development paths have been tightly intertwined.

Transition studies as a field is heavily under construction. Like many new fields of research, transition studies have encountered both enthusiasm and critical voices. This paper seeks to review some of this criticism with a keen eye to understanding its underlying assumptions, and to articulate implications for transition research. We start in section 2 by discussing various examples of criticisms on transition studies and its related sustainability governance discourse, using transition management as a case study. We conclude that, while some of the earlier criticism have been taken up and inspired theory development, underlying epistemological issues remain. A clearly articulated epistemological basis might help transition researchers to be more consistent and precise, especially in terms of how to conceive of the relationship between understanding transitions and influencing them; and in terms of the implications of that for *doing* transition management as a process of iterating between understanding and influencing. Such articulation may also help critics to better appreciate the ambitions and nature of transition management, stimulating more specific comments that may be productive for transition researchers in further developing the field. The latter is not to instrumentalise criticism, and even less to deny its intrinsic value; rather, we wish to emphasize that a young field needs to take up criticism, and that this may be promoted by accuracy on both sides.

Therefore in section 3, we move on to address epistemological assumptions of transition management literature and its underlying complexity paradigm. We contrast this with other views on complexity, in particular the view of deconstruction. We demonstrate how some criticisms on transition management are inherently based on a deconstructive logic. As we will further discuss in section 3, we understand ‘deconstructive logic’ here broadly as the critical scrutiny and unpacking of both societal and scientific practices and their underlying assumptions, such as the assumption that complex systems can be influenced into a desired direction. We then deliberate how to better benefit from this deconstructive critique on transition management. We will argue that interesting opportunities to build on this criticism emerge when we acknowledge that the criticized transition literature itself takes a deconstructive stance towards incumbent assumptions in social and scientific practices. More fundamentally, we will show that much work in transition studies crucially builds on – while also aiming to move beyond – a deconstructive position, towards what we call a *reconstructive* approach. Thus, we argue in section 4, transition studies could much more benefit from such criticism than its propagators have hitherto acknowledged, as it may help the effort to enable deconstruction of the social order as is, and then go beyond this towards the reconstruction of potential alternative futures. We elaborate this reconstructive approach on three grounds: (1) a research focus beyond ‘is’ versus ‘ought’ towards ‘can be’, (2) interpretative research and reflexivity, and (3) a phronetic understanding of sustainability.

2. Transition management: criticism & responses

2.1. Criticisms on early transition studies

For reasons of space, we focus our discussion on one key example of transition governance: the transition management (TM) approach. It is an interesting case for our purposes, as its development has been partly informed by practical experiences and applications (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010). TM can be regarded as a governance model under development, which on its turn is being informed by theory development (Loorbach, 2007, 2010). It is continuously adapted and extended on the basis of explorative and design-oriented research on both *transition dynamics* and *transition governance*. Deductive research and theory development are combined with inductive and empirical research designs, including modelling approaches and action research. Complexity theory, governance theory and social theory are used to develop governance approaches, management ‘instruments’ and ‘policy tools’, which in turn are adapted on the basis of empirical testing and action research experiences.

One of the most common, and important, points of critique on early transition research has been the lack of attention to power and politics in transition literature and in TM literature in particular (Shove and Walker, 2007, 2008; Smith and Stirling, 2008; Hendriks, 2009; Meadowcroft, 2007; Meadowcroft, 2009; Stirling, 2011). As pointed out by Meadowcroft:

“Transition management is not primarily concerned with the political processes through which societal goals are determined and revised, collective decisions are enforced, and resources are authoritatively allocated. Nor does it focus on the evolution of societal values and value conflict, and with spheres of individual and family life, the definition of group identities, and citizenship. Yet all these spheres are important to processes of societal change, and relevant to governance for sustainable development” (2007: 10).

Other authors have pointed out that “the tactical opportunities for the structural power of incumbent socio-technical regimes to mould discourse” challenge the “straightforward ‘managerial’ understandings of transition management and

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