



UNMAKING: a research programme on societal transformation to sustainability through the disruption of capitalism

This project uses a novel interdisciplinary theory and an innovative combination of methods to explain whether, when and how grassroots initiatives unmake environmentally disruptive institutions and practices that are deeply ingrained in capitalist societies.

Motivation

Modern capitalist societies engage in destructive modes of interaction with the natural environment. The notion of sustainable development was proposed in the 1990s as an attempt to resolve such tension, but improvement has been limited. Destructive interaction with the natural environment is now recognized not simply as a remediable side effect of modern capitalist societies, but instead as one of their characterizing traits. The need for a societal transformation to sustainability is increasingly accepted. However, the question of how a societal transformation to sustainability can actually come about is still open. Grassroots initiatives may hold the potential to transform society toward sustainability, but their capacity to generate such transformation is unclear.

Primary research question

To what extent, under what conditions and through what processes grassroots innovations unmake modern, capitalist institutions and practices?

Expected results

- This research comparatively studies grassroots initiatives in agriculture to
1. identify and categorize mechanisms of unmaking that are involved in radical grassroots initiatives
 2. explain whether and how unmaking creates space for alternatives from the individual to the social-ecological level
 3. understand mechanisms of unmaking at different levels interplay
 4. explain why unmaking may result in different outcomes in the face of different types of capitalism
 5. develop a theory of unmaking in societal transformation to sustainability.

What is 'unmaking'?

The concept of unmaking, which was originally proposed in this programme, denotes **multilevel processes to deliberately 'make space' for alternatives that are incompatible with capitalist socioecological relations**. They can vary from open confrontation to 'exit' from the dominant system.

For example, members of the global Transition Towns Movement undertake a so-called 'inner transition' to *liberate* themselves from habitual and addictive tendencies, and enable harmonious engagement with people and nature. Urban gardeners physically *deconstruct* spaces to give them new meaning and innovative food producing uses. The ecovillage of Lammas lobbied the Welsh Government to *reject* standard land use classifications and change planning legislation, which permitted access to land for self-built ecohousing. Fordhall farm in England *refused* economic growth imperatives, which created the need for innovative 'popular shareholding' governance arrangements

Case studies and methods

UNMAKING focuses on whether and how capitalism is already being unmade by two types of grassroots innovation informed by visions of societal transformation and holding the potential to lead such transformation: **permaculture** and **community supported agriculture**.

A sample of permaculture and community supported agriculture initiatives will be studied over five years in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. The research explores causality in complex social-ecological systems comparing narratives across selected case studies. To do so, it combines Event Structure Analysis and Qualitative Comparative Analysis.

Novelty

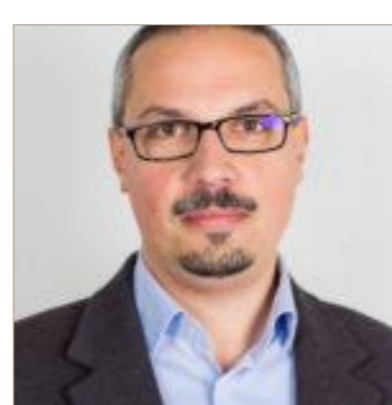
This research

1. approaches societal transformation from the novel perspective of unmaking, rather than the introduction of innovations
2. mobilizes and innovatively integrates theories that have so far not been considered in the analysis of transformation to sustainability
3. originally employs mixed methods to capture trajectories of change, and to generalize causal mechanisms in complex social-ecological systems.

Team

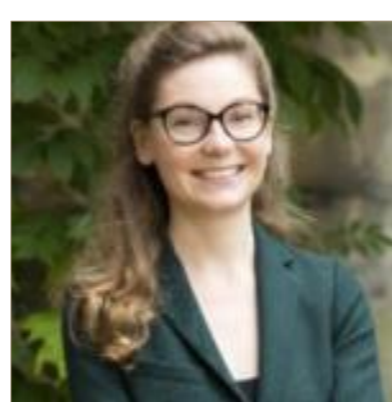
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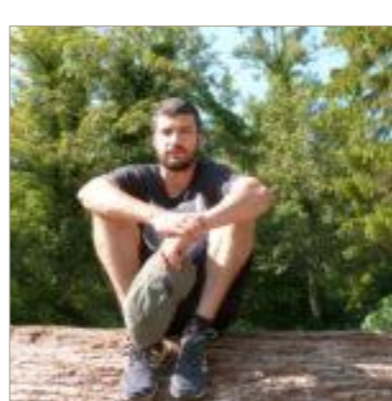
Laura van Oers – PhD candidate

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Jacob holds a double degree in agronomic sciences (University of Liège, Belgium) and political ecology (AgroParisTech, France). He graduated with a thesis on the commodification of nature and the ways in which politicizing nature might open new perspectives for alternative collective futures. In his PhD, Jacob will focus on the Netherlands and Spain. Email: j.d.a.smessaert@uu.nl



Guilherme Raj – PhD candidate

Guilherme graduated in 2018 from the Master's in Communication, Health and Life Sciences, specialization Innovations in Sustainable Food Systems at Wageningen University. His thesis investigated the power relations and dynamics that influence the development of alternative food networks in Kyoto, Japan. In his PhD, Guilherme will focus on Italy. Email: g.desapavariniraj@uu.nl



Leonie Guerrero – PhD candidate

Leonie graduated in 2018 from the Master's in Social-Ecological Resilience and Sustainable Development at Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University. Her thesis focused on food initiatives using traditional knowledge as a source of innovation for more sustainable food systems. In her PhD, Leonie will focus on Germany and Italy. Email: l.guerrerolar@uu.nl



Julia Spanier – PhD candidate

Julia holds a Master's in Nature, Society and Environmental Governance from the University of Oxford. In her thesis, she analysed the assembling of postcapitalist, more-than-human, rural-urban futures in the French countryside. In her PhD, Julia will focus on Germany. Email: j.r.spanier@uu.nl



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